

Growing Pains

Mary Cecil's two previous novels, *In Two Minds* and *Something in Common*, marked her as a writer of intelligence, sensitivity and humour. These qualities combine in *Growing Pains* to give freshness and a sharply original flavour to a subject which has attracted many novelists but can rarely have been treated so successfully.

This is the story of Iris Stewart from her earliest half-recalled memories of nursery life in a comfortable household of Nanny, servants and remote parents, through her days at a convent school and her attempts to become a professional musician to the harassed existence of her married life with children in a modern council estate. It is a study of the unfolding of a personality in search of emotional stability and self-confidence.

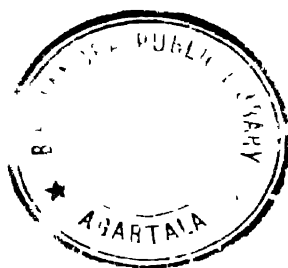
The method is episodic, a series of scenes in which Iris is presented, sometimes from the inside as the narrator of her own life, sometimes from the outside as observed by the author. This brilliantly written novel, by turns introspective and high-spirited, tragic and hilariously funny, is one which will greatly enhance Miss Cecil's growing reputation.

By the same author

IN TWO MINDS
SOMETHING IN COMMON

MARY CECIL

Growing Pains



LONGMANS

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO LTD
48 Grosvenor Street, London, W1
*Associated companies, branches and representatives
throughout the world*

*Printed in Great Britain by
Latimer Trend & Co Ltd Plymouth*

To Nanny

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The First Party

They keep saying about the Party. There is a parting in my hair. I can't make it come, but Nanny can, quick as anything. She ties on the big pink bow. 'Ow!' 'Fusspot,' says Nanny. I can see a fafe (that's a pottie) full of fuss, all frothy like the waves spit out on the beach. I told the dolls about Party. I put it into each of their ears. My legs are part of my body.

'What is a Party, Nan?'

Nan's eyes jump under her frizzy hair which is laughing all the time. Tramlines come on her face. My little red car would like to run along those.

'A party?' Her eyes bounce about. 'Bless my soul. What next! It's lots of girls and boys, and they play games, and have a lovely time. There'll be balloons and jellies, I should think. Turn round now and let me do you up.'

My best dress has long ribbons, six each side of my middle. They fly when I run.

'Stand still, now.'

I like to stroke them. The blue ones are called Pig and Sand. They are my best ones.

'Teddy wants ribbons too.'

'They're only for girls,' says Nan.

'Teddy is sometimes a girl, specially Saturdays.'

Nanny makes a little noise at my nails.

'Scissors . . . scissors . . . where are they . . . Can't see for looking!' she laughs and picks up the scissors. She cuts my nails and her chin waggles. Her mouth looks like it's eating something nasty, spinach perhaps.

'I can't help it. I have to, when I'm cutting nails. Now, your dancing shoes.'

'No. Red shoes.'

'Not for a party. You must have your best.'

'Red shoes are my best. I don't want dancing shoes.'

'Nuff said.'

Nan opens her mouth a tiny way, so I stop.

Dancing shoes have snappy elastic. They are shiny and soft like pussies. There are black bobbles. When I touch them my tummy is full of fur.

'What is Teddy wearing for Party?'

'Teddy isn't going to the party. He wouldn't enjoy himself. Far rather stay at home.'

'Party must be horrid.'

'Stuff and nonsense. You'll love it. It's your cousin Anne's birthday, and you're taking her a present.'

'How old is she?'

'Ten. That means Maureen must be thirteen now. Hardly seems possible. Tall, both of them. And their mother such a slip. Of course, the Major is a fair height. Such a shame Anne takes after him. . . .'

Nanny's voice runs under the bed and out the other side, then it jumps over the chair and goes in and out of the things on the dressing-table. And more is coming out of her mouth all the time, like my ribbons, but going on longer. Anne and Maureen are tall for their ages. I don't want them to be. In church it's like a forest going up. I'm only as far as the hymn books which have a funny sniff.

'Now is that everything?'

Nan's eyes go pecking round the room.

'Stop here and I'll fetch Anne's present. Don't get dirty, whatever you do.'

Nanny's shoes squeak as if her hurrying hurt them. I look in the mirror and I'm not sure if it's me. I creep into Mummy's room. There's nobody coming. I run to her bed and put my face into her nightie. The happy smell purrs in my head.

I hear Nan's shoes crying on the stairs, so I run back to our room.

'Well!'

Nan huffs the Well out on the air.

'Can't turn one's back a second. I'll just have to do your hair

again. What have you been up to? I don't know, I'm sure. Where did that comb go? Things walk. Ah! Now how did it get down there? Oo, I've a bone in my leg. Old age creeping on . . . better blow your nose again, just for safety. Did you do fafes when I asked you? Better run and do it again, to make sure. I'll pull.'

'I don't want to. I did it. Really and truly.'

Nan's talking is full of chuckles. When we go down the road to Aunt Patsy's house, it dances all the way. I hold the present for Anne. I wish it was Teddy.

I listen to the footsteps. Mine hardly sound at all. Nan's go click-clock, click-clock, very busy and biscuity. Sometimes the shoes have to clear their throats, then they go on, click-clock. All the shoes are talking to each other. Some of them shout important things all the way down the road. Under Nanny's voice saying about the Johnsons there are shoes saying 'Horrid old Spider', and 'Eat up Nicely', and 'Hurry up Slowcoach', and 'Bags I the Bathroom' – such a hullabaloo, all talking at once, no manners, but nobody says anything.

A pity my shoes are so young. If I stamp them to grow them up, they say Ouch Ouch, and Nanny says 'Walk properly, now.' When I'm tall like the others, my shoes will tell me tall secrets. Then all the other shoes in the street will be cross. Do you know who learnt me about the shoes? It was my pussy, Fizz. His ears jump in front when he hears shoes, and he listens with all his fur. Then he licks his paws quick' and sits down to think about it.

We turn the corner. I can see the hurdy-gurdy man. I start to cry. There is a monkey on top. It has too many hands.

'Come along, now. Don't dawdle. Shut your eyes and I'll tell you when we've passed it.'

Nanny rings Aunt Patsy's bell.

'Don't forget to thank them for having you, and wipe your mouth after tea, oh and give Anne her present straight away. . . .'

The door opens. A horrid fierce roar leaps out at us.

'Come in,' Maureen says, 'we're playing Oranges and Lemons. Super fun.'

She's very clean. I think I'll go home now. But Nanny smiles and goes away. Now there's only parcel.

'Shall I take that? It's for Anne, I suppose. Lucky cat. My birthday's too near Christmas to be much good.'

I hold on tight to parcel.

'Well, come upstairs and take your coat off.'

But it doesn't feel safe. Another roar rushes out. I think I'll stay here until Nanny comes back. If she does.

'Oh lord,' Maureen says, 'I told Mummy what would happen if we asked babies. Wait here and I'll fetch her.'

Aunt Patsy comes, pushing along a funny smell. She's all dressed up and not like Aunt Patsy. If I don't talk perhaps they'll go away and leave me alone.

'Aren't you pretty?'

Aunt Patsy lifts me up and shakes me. She carries me upstairs and into a bedroom: It doesn't smell like any of ours. She takes off my cloak and says what a sweet dress, was it made? Anne comes in.

'Hullo Iris, Maureen says you've got a present for me. May I have it?'

I hold on to parcel, and don't speak.

'Never mind now,' Aunt Patsy says, 'we're feeling a little strange.'

'Well, it's my present. I call it a rotten swiz.'

We go downstairs, but all of a sudden Anne snaps parcel away and runs off laughing.

'It rattles! Bet I can guess what! Only hope it isn't one I've already got.'

Anne is at the bottom of the stairs. It takes me a long time, holding on, because I don't reach up far enough. Parcel has gone. I have grown even smaller. Then I feel the ribbons. I hold on tight to Pig and Sand.

Aunt Patsy opens a door and we go in. There are lots of big children, all everywhere. They are roaring and have too many arms. Their mouths are huge. I think they are going to be sick.

'Come along, dear.'

Aunt Patsy pulls me along. I should like to be at home.

'We're having such fun. It's Musical Chairs. Wouldn't you like to join in?'

There is a bang. A chair has fallen down. They're all stamping and shouting, and pushing. Their shoes are saying Ouch, but they don't care. They're horrid. They have too many hands.

'Well, stand here and watch. We *are* rather excited, being Musical Chairs.'

I watch the huge monkeys. A pressing starts in my tummy. Why doesn't Nanny come? I always say, 'I want fafes, Nan,' and she knows.

'Come on, Iris,' says Maureen, 'we're going to play Hunt the Slipper. You can play that. It's potty. I'll show you.'

The monkeys sit down, but they go on pushing and making sick noises.

'Fafes.'

'What?' Maureen says, 'oh well, you watch us for a bit.'

The monkeys are throwing a shoe at each other. Why did Maureen go away? I said fafes. She didn't care. My tummy is pressing. The monkeys throw the shoe. They are pulling it and hitting it. Poor shoe. It will die. My tummy is trying to push out the water. I hold on to Pig and Sand. The monkeys throw poor shoe up in the air. It falls on my feet. I pick it up quick, and hug it.

'All better now. Don't cry. There's nothing to be afraid of. Only a silly old dream.'

The monkeys are shouting:

'Chuck it back! Hurry up! Oh, do buck up!'

I kiss the shoe better.

They all get up. They come at me. Lots of legs and arms and mouths all muddled up, and roaring. They get closer. They grow and grow. They fill up the space. Why doesn't Nanny come?

And then my doorway bangs open. I try and shut it with my hand, but it won't. There's warmness. There's wet everywhere. It goes down my legs and on the floor.

I think I am on fire with sadness.

'Don't cry. It doesn't matter. It's all right. . . .'

But I look at the pool on the floor, and my inside has turned into monkeys.

Jam Spoons

When I wake up in the morning, first of all I remember that I'm me, and I'm seven-and-a-quarter. I'm taller than Beryl, who is eight. I watch the dusts dancing in the sunbeam which comes through the parting in the curtains, and I wonder if there are dusts only in the sunbeam, because they like it, and all the specks in the room go there. There are all sorts of things in the flowers on the curtains, but you can't explain them. When you have measles, you see faces in the wallpaper, and one of them has half a nose. Sometimes, when you wake up in the middle of the night, you see a monkey sitting on top of the curtain rail, but Philip, who is three-and-a-bit, says it isn't a monkey at all. It is a trumttoo, which comes at night and is very black with red eyes. If he calls Nanny, she wakes up and says: 'Go away, you nasty old Trumttoo,' but it sounds funny without her teeth in. Cokers are nice animals, Philip says. They slide up his bed and are furry with large smiles. They make friendly squeaks, but Trumttoos growl. . . . Nanny gets out of bed, scratches her head with her face screwed up like 'Oo', and she dresses under her nightie. I watch very carefully, so that when I'm grown-up I'll be able to do it too. You can't, with pyjamas. She picks up her corsets from the chair and whisks them under the nightie. Now you can't see anything at all, except a billowing and a tinkle-tinkle-tinkle, until the suspenders are done up. Sometimes the nightie gets caught up, and you can see Nanny's beautiful wiggly veins on her legs. I shall have them too, when I'm grown-up. You can hear the clicks of the hooks, like knocking your teeth together, and then the snappy noise of elastic. Suddenly Nanny shakes herself, and *foof!* the nightie floats to the floor. She steps out of it, almost dressed, like magic.

Philip gets into my bed, which is a treat. He has been in Nanny's bed, which makes two treats. We play the game where we swing backwards and forwards side by side, saying a poem

out of one of the Christmas books, in a jogging voice. Mummy thinks it's a funny game, but really we're going somewhere. Then I draw a picture on Philip's forehead with my finger, and he shuts his eyes and guesses what it is. Then he draws one on mine, but it is nearly always a Coker or a Trumtroo, so I never know. I don't tell him it isn't fair, because he's only three-and-a-bit. . . . Nanny walks right through the sunbeam, and when she is out the other side, the dusts are muddled up. Sometimes she talks in her sleep, and it sounds like fur. Once she said: 'Look out! The pearls are dropping.' I told her in the morning, then I told Mummy, and I said it over and over again to myself, 'The pearls are dropping, the pearls are dropping,' until it was all in one smear and the words made a picture. . . . Philip goes out, slish-slosh in his slippers, and he gets into Mummy's bed. Today is Wednesday, and that means Magda's piano lesson. Magda is ten. Wednesday is yellow, and in the middle. Saturday and Sunday are on a higher part, but its different when you learn it in French. Mercredi is fishy, and Dimanche is squashy, and Jeudi is like a hot bath, an inch-by-inch one, when you hunch your knees and put them down very slowly, so that the water creeps up like cats' tongues, only softer, and the island gets smaller and smaller, but you mustn't let it split into two. The days go upwards, but the alphabet and numbers go across. What was there in those places when I was too little to know the letters and numbers?

If I screw up my eyes I can see colours round the edges of things, but I can't do it when grown-ups are there or they say 'don't make those awful faces', and Nanny says the wind will change. . . . If you part your porridge in the middle like hair, the milk curls in from the sides and fills it up, then you can float a crumb. Philip has Bemax on bread for breakfast, and just as he is biting it, Magda and I lean forward and look at him, and he laughs. The Bemax flies off in a cloud all over the table. 'You're not to make him laugh,' says Nanny, but she is nearly smiling too. She reads her letter, and when her eyes get to the end of a line, her head jerks back to the start of the next one,

and goes slowly along again. 'I'm cross,' she says, 'my sister May has had another girl. That makes four. Whose turn is it to lick the jam spoon?' 'My turn,' says Magda quickly. I say: 'Scuse *me*, but it's *my* turn. You know jolly well it is.' 'Jolly well isn't,' Magda says. 'Jolly well is,' I say, and we go on shouting "'Tis,' "'Tisn't,' "'Tis,' "'Tisn't,' until Philip starts banging with his feet under the table and squealing with his mouth full. The Bemax comes out in puffs, and he won't stop. Nanny says: 'Magda, you're really getting too old to lick jam spoons, let alone make all this fuss. You ought to be ashamed. You're the eldest.' Magda looks fierce, and says: 'All right. I don't care about silly old jam spoons. It's babyish.' I feel very sorry for her, and it's queer: there is no fun in the jam spoon now, and it just tastes like jam on a spoon. Magda must be very good. Giving up jam spoons! Goodness! I go and tell Mummy, then Daddy, who makes his surprised face, with his eyes and mouth opened very wide. I tell cook and the maid who has too much water in her mouth so that it bubbles in the cracks. If I had too much water in mind, I'd keep spitting it out in plops. They say Oh, and Good Gracious me, and Did You Ever, Now. But they don't see the bigness of it.

Philip sits in front of the gasfire on his pottie. He stands up to see the red round on his behind, but it hasn't got there yet. I read my books and smell the pages. They all have different smells.

We take Magda to her piano lesson. Her face is like a picture on the wall, but I think she must want to cry and it won't, so it's just an ache in her throat and a stiffness behind her eyes. If only one tear rolls down, you have to press another out of the other eye, to make it equal.

I watch for the squares on the wall which say 'Ft in', and then you are getting near a giant biscuit on the pavement which Nanny calls a fire hydrant. I step in the middle every time or else something will happen. I look at the horses dragging carts along. They have frilly ankles and their heads nod all the time. Their necks must get tired. I watch the dogs whose tails curl right

over and tap their backs. They are called Touchtails. The nicest ones have coatpocket ears which flap all the while their legs are jogging.

Nanny stops to talk to people and I say loudly, because it's important: 'Magda's given up licking jam spoons.' But they smile like mist and Nanny whispers, 'Don't interrupt. It's rude.' Philip shuffles along being a train. 'Ch-ch-ch.' We kick a stone along, but it goes into the gutter and the other stones aren't the same.

Nanny buys bitter aloes and the chemist with no chin says: 'Does the little boy bite his nails?' 'No,' says Nanny, 'it's the eldest.' They both look shocked at Magda, and she stares straight at the cough lozenges, very fierce. She drags me farther up the road, and says, slow and unjoined: 'You look at horses' behinds and think rude things. I shall tell Mummy if you're not careful.' I don't understand, but she must be right, because she's given up licking jam spoons. I feel bulgy inside. Perhaps I'm going to be sick. I try and decide, but there's too much noise.

Miss Brownley opens the door and Magda stands beside her, staring at me with iron eyes, to make me shy. Miss Brownley tells me I've grown, but I only look up as far as her chest, or Magda will pinch me later on.

We go home and Philip runs his fingers along the railings. He sings: 'Plink plonk, plonk plink.' I sing: 'Plinkety plonk, plonkety plink. Isn't it fun, Nanny?' 'Yes, but you'll wear out your gloves.'

Animal biscuits for tea, and Philip eats the tails first, then the legs. I eat round and round making it smaller each time. Magda eats properly. Philip spills his milk and Nanny puts a saucer under the table-cloth where the wet is. 'Clumsy, careless,' she says, but she isn't angry because she's reading her *Nursery World*. I unwind my Swiss-roll and make it a circle. 'Whose turn is it to lick the jam spoon?' Philip stretches out a hand dotted with crumbs like bristles. He leans his tongue out and licks. Then he sucks with swooshing noises. He chatters his teeth on the spoon and wags his head from side to side, making the spoon swing. I

make my eyes see in a woolly way, and look at him. His mouth and nose join up, and his eyes melt and the spoon goes wavy. He sighs when Nan ny takes it away. It didn't taste like that for me. Magda must have put a magic on it.

Magda is staring at me without blinking. She chews slowly and stares slowly. There seems to be a brick in my tummy. Suddenly her eyes crease into slits and she iaughs. She's getting old. She doesn't want to lick jam spoons any more.

Denny

Nanny was organizing a 'Grand Clear-out'. It was for her Christmas parcels to poor children. She looked through the clothes on her own, but Iris and Philip helped with their books and toys. At least, Iris did. She enjoyed it. She imagined those hungry-eyed little girls whom Nanny described so compassionately, waking up on Christmas morning and finding the miracle of a filled stocking. But Philip was only three. As soon as he realized what the sudden activity was about, he hustled to and from the nursery cupboard, collecting all his toys into a corner of the room. Then he seated himself on guard amongst them, glaring at the others with large, hostile eyes.

'This can go,' Nanny was saying, 'and you certainly don't want this old thing any more.'

The contents of the toy cupboard and bookshelves were now sorted into groups on the floor. Nanny looked at her pile, and sighed.

'I did hope to get a lot this year,' she said disappointedly, 'because I've heard of another East End address. There isn't really enough here for four parcels.'

'Let's go through the books again,' Iris suggested.

But Nanny was staring thoughtfully at the doll box.

'Do you know what, Iris?' she said suddenly, 'you've never given away a doll. You have fifteen of them now. . . .'

'Sixteen,' Iris corrected, beginning to feel apprehensive.

'Sixteen dolls. You don't really need them all, do you? I mean, you can't play with them all at once, can you?'

It was such an extraordinary question that there was no answer to it. Iris could hardly have been more shocked than if Nanny had said to Mummy:

'Now, you don't honestly need three children, do you? Why not give one away to a poor lady without any at all?'



'But Nanny, they're *my dolls*,' she murmured in a small voice.

'And a very lucky girl you are too!' retorted Nanny, 'do you realize that there are thousands of little girls who have never had one doll, let alone sixteen?'

Iris couldn't imagine life without dolls. It gave her an emp'y, starved feeling.

'All right, Nan,' she mumbled, 'give them one of mine.'

'That's better,' beamed Nanny, and as she plunged both arms into the box, she told Iris happily just how grateful some lonely child was going to be, not to mention God, who was, at this very moment, showering approval down on her. Iris watched her pick up Colleen, and her heart missed a beat; Colleen rejected, she breathed a big sigh. Then it was Robert who came up for consideration. It was terrible. They were *all* so important. Her heart reached out to each one, and their glassy blue eyes fixed her with piteous appeal.

'Ah!' cried Nanny, 'this is the one I was thinking of!'

She held up Denny. Iris swallowed with difficulty.

'Who gave it to you?' she was asked.

'I can't remember.'

'No, neither can I,' Nanny said with satisfaction. 'must have been years ago. I don't suppose anyone remembers now, so nobody will be put out.'

Iris took the baby doll in her arms.

'Why do you want Denny?'

'Well, he's so old and battered, hardly any paint left, one arm missing. . . .'

Her voice prattled on, pointing out Denny's endless defects, but that only made things worse. He needed so much more love. He needed Iris's protection from the new dolls, who were inclined to be bossy and lord it over him. What would he do without her?

'... but to a little girl who's never had a doll before, he'll seem the most beautiful one in the world,' Nanny concluded.

'I think Denny was my first doll,' Iris said carelessly, 'I don't remember anyone before him.'

'There you are, then! You can understand exactly how this other little girl will feel, Denny being *her* first doll.'

'Yes, I can.'

Nanny looked hard at her.

'Are you sure you don't mind?' she frowned, 'I don't want any scenes about this later on. I wouldn't dream of sending one of the good dolls, but this one *is* finished.'

Iris squeezed Denny's hand to show she thought him as perfect as when he began. Then she laid him gently on the condemned pile, and Nanny gathered him up in an armful of toys and went out briskly to start the parcelling.

Philip jumped up as soon as the door closed, and ran over to his sister.

'Denny going?'

'Yes,' Iris snapped, and added fiercely, 'I know I'm horrid and selfish, but without me to look after him, that poor baby would be better off dead and buried. How can I be sure he'll be properly cared for?'

'Dead and buried,' Philip repeated, rooting absorbedly amongst the rubbish pile, and retrieving a headless soldier here, a broken lorry there. He hastened back to his corner with them just as Nanny returned.

'But you're too young to understand,' Iris muttered, 'and Nanny is too worried about everyone's Christmasses.'

She went into the kitchen and saw Denny about to be packed up. She poured out her love for him in one tender, good-bye kiss. Then she hurried away. She could not bear to see the finished parcel.

She was trying to explain to the other dolls, who were disgusted at her giving away her own child, when Nanny came in and said reproachfully:

'There was no need to take Denny behind my back, Iris. You know perfectly well you only had to say.'

'But I didn't!' Iris said, leaping up in distress, 'I haven't taken him. Where is he, then?'

'Well!' exclaimed Nanny doubtfully, 'I don't know, I'm sure.'

He was in the kitchen one minute, and then the bell went, and when I came back – he was gone! Are you sure you haven't hidden him somewhere?

But Iris was already in tears. It was bad enough having to sacrifice her son to some rough little girl who would drag him about by his only arm, but now that nobody even knew where he *was* . . .

'Never mind,' soothed Nanny, 'he'll turn up. There's an explanation for everything, you know.'

But Denny did not turn up. Everyone was asked, and nobody knew. The whole thing was a mystery. The parcels went away without him.

It must have been the following summer, when Iris was having a dolls' laundry day. She had washed and ironed their clothes, threaded them with new pink ribbon, and re-dressed the excited, expectant owners. They looked so fresh and lovely that she assembled them on the lawn in a photographic group. She fetched her camera and took a lot of trouble fitting the picture neatly inside the little glass window. She had just encouraged them to smile, please, when Philip trotted up with an armful of animals which he dumped in front of Yvette, the French doll.

'Bumble and Red Ted want to be in it too,' he puffed.

'Oh, all right,' Iris agreed reluctantly, and rearranged the group to include the bears.

'Wait!' screeched Philip, 'Felix and Nameless will be sad!' and he ran backwards and forwards from the house until he had amassed all his family.

Iris focused for the tenth time, and was about to take the snap, when Mummy called from the window:

'Children! Laddie is digging up that ditch again! Go and chase him off before the gardener sees!'

The ditch at the bottom of the garden was being filled in gradually with old unwanted grass. Iris and Philip raced down, shouting and waving at the terrier, who cocked his ears and stood grinning guiltily with lolling, self-conscious tongue.

'Bad dog! Naughty Laddie!' they scolded, and Iris bent to

replace the hay scattered round about. But as she knelt down, she caught sight of a tiny doll's shoe sticking up out of the ditch. She pulled at it, and it became a leg. With a cry of wonder, she unearthed the whole of Denny. He was soaked through. Months of damp had taken away his features altogether. But he was still Denny.

Laddie's grin had broadened. He winked a bright brown eye at Philip, who pelted off across the lawn, chuckling deeply within himself. When he heard Iris's footsteps behind him, he shrieked and laughed so much that he tripped and fell, hitting the ground with the short suddenness of a small child. Iris picked him up, and held him, wriggling and squirming to free himself gurgling joyously.

'Philip!' she panted, 'don't be silly! I only want to ask you why you did it.'

He paused in his struggling, and gazed from her to Denny with wide, wondering eyes.

'Was it because I said he would be better dead and buried?'

Philip shook his head, and then nodded absently. It was such a long time ago, and over there, Laddie was snapping at a butterfly. He scampered off down the gravel path to join in the game.

Iris folded Denny to her, and whispered how much she had missed him, how she would make up to him for all he had been through. She held him out in triumph to the dolls patiently waiting to be photographed. She explained that from now on, Denny would sleep in the coveted lacy cradle, and the others must take turns in the cot, and no nonsense about it, thank you. She placed him in the very centre of the group and levelled the camera once more.

As she glimpsed his featureless face in the little glass square, she was filled with relief and happiness. Nobody but his own mother could possibly love him now.

Wicked Uncle

This is the end of Christmas Day. Last year was quite different. All the same things happened today, but of course, I was eight then, and now I'm nine. It used to be so exciting, and everything was magic.

Mummy put holly on top of the pictures in the hall and along the mantelpiece in the dining-room. She tied mistletoe on to the lights, and Magda, being the eldest, helped her. Philip and I did the paper chains. We stuck them with flour paste, and I put a blue in between two yellows, then a red in between two greens. Philip kept tearing them, and sticking the wrong bits, but he's only four. He licked off the flour paste and dipped his finger in the bowl for more. Nanny tied them across the ceiling in five ways, like a star. Then she switched on the light and cried:

'There! Aren't they pretty?'

Philip hopped round the table on one foot, lolling his head backwards, to show he was specially pleased.

Grown-ups are funny at Christmas. They hide all our presents and open their own. Granny came to stay. She put her presents on the bed, and walked up and down looking at them sideways. She said: 'I could have sworn I sent that to dear Connie last year,' and, 'Now who on earth can I saddle with this dreadful thing?' and, 'Ah, just the very thing for poor Molly.'

On Christmas Eve, Philip was sick from excitement. I am not sick until next morning. Nanny gave us a teaspoon of black-currant wine to make us sleep. We lay in bed, and bounced our behinds. Downstairs, there were hurrying noises and doors closing, and we knew that surprises were going on. We sang 'Good King Wenceslas' in a ribbony squeak because that's how it wants to go, and then 'I Saw Three Ships' in a thundery growl. Nanny banged on the ceiling from underneath, and we laughed. Giggles came up from my tummy like a string of beads. When I got tired of bouncing, and tickling Philip, I cuddled into Winnie,

my teddy, and pretended the story where she comes alive. We walk in the garden hand-in-hand, and she talks in a woolly voice – but when I got to that part, I fell asleep.

Just before lunch time, all the relations came. Aunts and uncles, great-aunts and great-uncles, and cousins. They smiled all the time, saying: 'Goodness, how they've grown!' 'Soon they won't be children any more. . . .' 'How time flies! It seems only yesterday when. . . .' We said Quite-well-thank-you quite-well-thank-you, over and over again. Nanny nudged and hissed: 'Shake hands', or 'Give auntie a nice kiss'. Some of the moustaches were wet, and Great-Aunt Dora was prickly.

They sat round the big table in the dining-room, 'with Magda, and Daddy said brightly: 'We're thirteen.' Mummy gave him a long look because she'd just told him not to say it. Philip and I sat at a small table with Nanny, who looked worried. She was afraid we'd choke or eat badly, but we were too busy watching Great-Uncle Adrian, who talked so much about the Government that crumbs flew out of his mouth. 'You can't trust Russia,' he said, and a crumb flew right over the flower bowl to the other side. It was beautiful. Daddy kept turning round and making a face at us. 'Is this tinned soup?' he asked suddenly, and Mummy went as pink as a blancmange. 'No,' she said, very heavy. Jean handed round the vegetables, talking to everybody in a nice thick voice, because she is a loonie from the asylum. 'You can't trust the French,' said Great-Uncle Adrian, spraying dots of water at Aunt Bella, who mopped them off her nose with tiny dabs of her hanky. Everyone interrupted each other, and the talking overlapped like pleats.

After the turkey, Great-Uncle Basil burst in the door and said, 'Hullo hullo hullo'. Everyone twisted round and said long 'ahs' on different notes, then: 'Here you are' and 'Well well'. He explained about the porter who told him the wrong train and was a blithering idiot of a man, and when he finished the story, he started all over again.

They laughed loudly at jokes which weren't jokes at all. Daddy growled: 'There you are! The man's not a gentleman.' So Uncle

Adrian fired a currant at him and said: 'Wha's that? What you say, old son?' Daddy shuffled himself in his chair, which he does when he's impatient.

Granny has friends with lovely names. She told Great-Aunt Bella, who is her sister, what Florrie Bull would have done in *her* place, and why Archie Grubb didn't do something.

After the almonds and raisins, we chose one chocolate each out of the glass dish which is a salt cellar on ordinary days. I picked a diamond shape with a silver ball on top. Philip took an oblong one with a sugar violet. We bit together, and showed each other the middles. Nanny got a nougat, which is difficult for false teeth, but then, she's very unlucky with chocolates.

The toasts were the best. Great-Uncle Adrian suddenly said fiercely: 'The King!' and everyone jumped up, dropping their table napkins, and chewing quickly like rabbits. There was silence except for the gulps. Daddy did the loudest one. They sat down, their faces spreading out again, and started talking from where they left off. Uncle Basil told a story which never seemed to begin, and Uncle Adrian tried to butt in with a longer story. At last Uncle Adrian cleared his throat like thunder and shouted: 'Absent Friends!' and up they bounced.

Then we went into the drawing-room to listen to the King's speech. The grown-ups couldn't decide who was to go through the door first. They said, 'After you, dear,' and 'No, no, you go ahead,' and then they all rushed together and there was a muddle and a lot of 'Sorries' splashing the air.

In the drawing-room they argued about the chairs. 'You sit here, dear.' 'No, dear, *you* sit there.' 'Well, you have this one, Basil.' 'No, dear, I'd rather sit here - *really*.' When Granny got everyone sitting down, she took a very small chair for herself and placed it plonk in front of the fire. The wireless was switched on by Daddy, who bent down like a frog. Everyone wore serious faces like masks. Uncle Adrian, who had a soupy moustache and two crumbs on his chin, shut his eyes because he heard better that way.

Granny leaned sideways and whispered to Mummy: 'Magda

grows more like you every day.' Great-Aunt Bella whispered back quickly: 'Oh *no*, dear. She's the image of her father.' Granny gave her annoyed laugh, which is a short choke. 'But she has her mother's eyes and forehead.' They argued about who Magda is like and then they quarrelled about who Philip takes after, and the louder they got, the more they said Dear and Darling. Uncle Adrian opened one eye like a marble and said: 'Sh!' So Gran said softly: 'Anyway, she's got a strong look of our poor dear mother.' When the speech was over, they stood to attention for 'God Save the King', and they all agreed it was his best effort so far. Uncle Basil sat down again, and his knees crackled like nuts, which was what Philip had been waiting for.

When the Christmas tree was lit up, the uncles barked and the aunts made trilly noises. It was so exciting I couldn't breathe. Philip went white because he is highly strung. Mummy cut off the presents with the kitchen scissors, and called out the names on the labels. Philip tried to think if he was going to be sick, so Nanny took him upstairs. I went into the nursery with all my presents piled up to my chin. I fingered them gently, and added them up over and over again. I introduced the new toys to the old toys, and opened and shut the sliding lid of the pencil box. Then I smelt the india rubber ball and the two books.

Uncle Basil came in. He said Hullo, and How are we? and What a lucky little girl you are, getting all those lovely presents. He took me on his knee, and his face went funny, as if he was eating sand. I showed him the new doll, but he didn't see. He stroked my arms and legs. . . . His mouth twitched. . . . He grunted to himself. . . . His eyes stopped being friendly. I was terribly afraid. I didn't know why. He breathed faster, and went on stroking, harder and harder. . . . Nanny opened the door, and I ran over to her. Uncle Basil laughed, said something jolly and gave Nanny half a crown.

She was specially nice for the rest of the day, calling me darling all the time, but it made me want to cry. I went into the drawing-room; all the faces turned on their necks and smiled; but the tree had changed. The tinsel didn't sparkle so much, and the little

lights weren't so twinkly. I nursed the new doll, but she didn't seem real any more. They said: 'What are you going to call her?' But I couldn't think. . . .

After that, Uncle Basil came down often, mostly on Sundays. He said: 'Let's play hide-and-seek,' and Mummy said to Granny: 'Isn't he good with the children?' He hid with me where Philip couldn't find us, because he was only four, and then he – but I can't explain. I don't know enough words. It was all so secret, and whispering, and he jumped if there were footsteps. I couldn't move, and my voice disappeared. Everything went tight, and my eyes wouldn't blink. I tried to tell Magda who is sensible, Nan says, and she said: 'You're old enough to look after yourself. I jolly well can. You're so soppy.'

Once, Philip did find us. He opened the coal-shed door, and his face went bright red. He shouted: 'Uncle Basil, what are you doing to Iris?' Sometimes I hid under the nursery table, pulling the cloth farther down in front of me. I made myself very small and tried not to breathe. Philip crawled under and hugged me. 'What's the matter, Iris?' he said. But I didn't know. I plaited the fringe of the tablecloth, and it didn't divide into three at the corner any more. . . .

I tried to explain to Mummy, and ask why. Granny was there too. They looked startled, and their faces snapped shut. First, they looked at me, then they looked at Daddy, but he wriggled in his chair and went on reading his paper. So Mummy stared all round the room and then out of the window. Granny stared all over the ceiling and then at the floor. She seemed surprised that it was there. Their eyes bumped together and bounced off quickly. So I thought it was wrong, and I felt ashamed. It was like they look when I say something about lavatories or knickers in front of visitors. There is a silence which grows into a heaviness in the bottom of my tummy.

After that, everything seemed to stop. I sat on the verandah trying to write fairy stories, and nothing came. I sharpened the pencils, and rubbed pieces of the page clean with the corner of my rubber. I played music on the gramophone, and walked in the

enchanted bushes at the end of the garden. I swung high in the swing, which always gave me ideas for stories before. But it was no good.

Nanny got very angry. She said: 'Why won't you play with Philip?' Philip just looked at me. He thought I had stopped loving him. I went into the garden with him and he said: 'You can't have forgotten the fairy game. Or what about pretending we're invisible?' I shook my head 'Well, what about Indians? I'll be your papoose, if you like.'

I couldn't make him see. He was too young. I couldn't pretend any more. I didn't feel I was me. At school nothing went right, and Miss Foster was ratty all the time. The others laughed because I couldn't catch the ball in Rounders.

Now it is Christmas Day again, but I wasn't sick this morning. We made paper chains, and I felt like Nanny, doing it to please Philip. All the relations came, and did the same things. Gran told what Florrie Bull had said, but the names didn't make pictures. I had a new baby doll with staring eyes, and a lot of books, but the smells weren't special any more. Everyone was jolly. Uncle Adrian sprayed crumbs. They squeaked and growled when the tree was lit up. They said the King had improved a lot since last year. And all the time, like silence in the centre of a noise, there was Uncle Basil watching me, smiling with his teeth sitting on his watery lip. . . .

And now I sit up in bed very stiff. I press the loose tooth gently outwards with the tip of my tongue, and suck it back again. I sniff Winnie, and flatten my nose against hers. Nanny is ironing downstairs, and there are short clicks when she puts the iron down. I can hear laughing, far away in the drawing-room. It is like splinters. . . . There is a thin humming in my ears. . . .

A door opens, creaks, and closes softly. Footsteps are coming up the stairs, sort of muffled like cotton-wool, with a tiny squeak at each step. They cross the landing, missing out the loose board. They stop, and a hand slithers, groping for the handle. The iron clicks again, and a sleepy buzz of voices trickles up through the floor.

The handle turns, without any noise, and the door opens.

Feet of Clay

Although Magda and Iris were sisters, they never walked to and from school together. Magda, the eldest by three years, ate her breakfast at top speed, flung her books into her attache case, crammed the black felt hat on to her head, and tore out of the house.

'Bye, Mum!' she'd shout up the stairs, wait for the answering call, shout louder if none came, and then slam the front door. In the nursery, Iris would say, through mouthfuls of bread:

'Wait for me, Magda.'

It was just habit, and nothing was expected to come of it. A few minutes later, she too scrambled out into the hall, having hugged her brother Philip, and kissed Laddie-dog on the nose, called a farewell to her mother, and ran out. She never had time to shut the door or the garden gate. In the distance she would see Magda striding ahead, pausing only to speak to the cart-horses on the way. She knew them all, individually, and they knew her. She didn't have fairies or imaginary friends, just horses.

Iris walked very fast to catch up her sister, though of course she didn't dare to come alongside, and when Magda stopped to exchange greetings with a horse, she stopped as well. It was an unwritten, unspoken law for Magda to walk three paces in front, and she glanced in the shop windows every now and again to make sure that the distance between them was correct to an inch.

They proceeded in this fashion on the pavement until they came to the bank on the other side of the road, when Iris crossed over to walk along the top of it, being careful not to get ahead of Magda, just the same. You could only walk on the top of the bank in the Second or perhaps in the Third forms. People in the Fourth, like Magda, had to walk on the path like grown-ups, which was terrible in the autumn, because there were lots of dead

leaves to shuffle through on the bank, but they were trodden down on the path. You saw the same people every day, mostly business men in bowler hats going up to London. There was Mother Hubbard, and the mumbling old woman who was a retired witch; there were the three bowler-hatted brothers, called Mustard, Pepper and Salt; there was the fascinating man who was a Russian Count and the other Special, whom she called the Canadian Lumberman; there was the Wiggly man, who had a twitch in his face; and there were the two murderers, one having done his murder and the other just going to.

Iris was walking along behind Magda this morning having safely passed both the murderers and the escaped lunatic. She was watching her sister's bottom swing rhythmically from side to side. Like a metronome. The faster she walked, the quicker the jerks. Funny things, behinds. Jokes about them at school, rather a rude subject at home, and a mystery altogether. All the same, Iris had heard Daddy discussing them one day, in snatches of conversation overheard from the drawing-room.

'Something so common about. . . . You never see one of Our Sort with a figure like that. . . . I always say, you can tell a woman's class by her bottom.'

Iris looked reflectively at Magda. Yes, it was. Daddy was right. It was a refined bottom, a ladylike bottom. A cultured, tea-and-toast-and-table-napkins-*not*-serviettes, bottom. And needless to say, a very clever, brainy, Fourth form and First Eleven bottom. Iris sighed in admiration. Magda was a Brain, good at games, good at music, and to cap it all, she had a cultured bottom. It was right and fitting for her to walk three paces ahead. A sort of class distinction. She was important, and the eldest. It was tough, being the eldest, as Magda said herself.

'I *hate* being the eldest; if you only knew what it is like, but then you're so sloppy anyway.'

Nanny was always saying:

'You should know better, at your age. You ought to set the example, instead of losing your temper.'

Still, Magda had compensations. The family admired her for

her cleverness, her tennis, her hockey and her piano-playing. She would do Great Things.

For a long time, Iris had been worried and unhappy about the three paces. She had sensed, from the back of Magda's neck, a strong dislike, a cold indifference, and a deep contempt. But suddenly she had realized. Magda was superior to her, she was in a different world. Iris *was* stupid and sloppy. Magda, in fact, was a kind of goddess in comparison, and she had innermost feelings.

'Nobody knows my innermost feelings,' she'd say fiercely, 'nobody knows. Nanny understands you and Philip because there's nothing to understand.'

Magda was a good and upright person.

'People think you're so sweet,' she'd say bitterly to Iris, 'doesn't that make you ashamed and guilty, when you know what you're really like?'

Iris would say Yes, it did; but perhaps grown-ups only said that for Mummy's sake, and underneath they might be thinking, 'what a horrid child. Nasty and vulgar.'

'I hope so,' Magda would say, 'because otherwise you're acting a lie. You're pretending to be someone you're not.'

But now, life was exciting and purposeful. Iris felt herself privileged to walk three paces behind. It was an honour, a distinction conferred on her by a gracious queen. She began to wait on Magda, run errands for her, try to please her in every way. She wrote long poems to her, which Magda seemed to think were good, and that was terribly thrilling, because before then, Magda had always sneered at the poetry, saying: 'It's soppy.'

Iris no longer minded Magda refusing to play with her in the garden. She and Philip had their imaginary world, and Magda had hers. She spent hours in the garden, cut off from everybody, playing Horses. She cantered up and down, trotted round and round, neighing, pawing the ground and tossing her head. Only once had she conscripted Iris and Philip for her game, when she needed a bad-tempered colt and a carthorse of very low intelligence. But usually she played all the parts herself. Now, it didn't matter. It was understandable.

Iris gazed at her sister's back view, and she glowed with pride and adoration. Her love for Philip was spontaneous and therefore taken for granted, but her new-found love for Magda was sacred and fanatical. As she walked along, she thought how queer grown-ups were. They said: 'Enjoy your childhood while you can. No worries or responsibilities. Wish I were you.' They harboured the strange idea that one was bound to be happy and carefree at school. Jolly good fun, and all that. Iris longed to be grown-up and free from the strain of school life. When you leave school you can choose your friends. Or, better still, have none at all, then you avoid being upset. The one excitement of the day would be the penny bars of chocolate, which were sold during the morning break. You bought one from the nun, asking for it in French, waited breathlessly for a minute, then ripped off the outer covering. Inside, was a coloured card, and if it was new to your collection, something very wonderful happened to your inside which went on all day. If it was one you'd already got, you swapped it with somebody else. But that was not the same thing.

Nearly at the school gates now. What was this? A crowd of people round a car drawn up by the kerb. As she passed, Iris caught a glimpse of a man holding up a white terrier, which dripped blood into a pool on the road. Its head hung limply, its eyes were almost out of their sockets with glassy terror. It looked like Laddie, but it couldn't be Laddie. He was at home in the nursery with Nanny and Philip. She felt sick at the sight of the dog, and her knees trembled, but she was relieved that it wasn't Laddie. God would not let him be run over; she prayed for him every night. Unless, of course, she had sinned very badly, and it couldn't be wrong to respect Magda's bottom, because Magda was a goddess. After all, God must have one too. There hadn't been much time for sinning today, though she could go over her thoughts carefully up to the present. . . .

They walked home in their usual manner, and Iris worried about her homework. There was no peace of mind at all, during

the term, and the memory of the terrier's eyes haunted her. She stopped to look in a toy shop, and Magda sped on, so that when she reached home, she was surprised to see Magda waiting for her at the gate. She was going to smile and express her joy, when she saw her sister's face. It was scarlet with anger, contorted with hatred and contempt.

'You little fool!' she hissed, shaking Iris with hands that dug into the soft flesh, 'you little idiot! You left the door and the gate open this morning, and Laddie got out. He followed you and now he's run over. It's your fault. You *killed* him!'

She pushed Iris down on to the steps and ran off. Iris sat still, nursing her arms where Magda had pinched them. Pinch pains were like banging a note on the piano very loud, then keeping the pedal on, and gradually it got softer and softer till it wasn't anything at all. But it couldn't be true about Laddie. It couldn't. God wasn't like that. She must have done something terrible. But what? She sat on the steps, crying for Laddie, and searching her soul.

'Yes,' she thought, 'I am wicked. I know what it is. All this worship of Magda, doing things for her and writing poems to her. I don't do it because she's a goddess or a better person than me; I just do it because I want her to like me, terribly badly. And now I've been punished Laddie is dead. Darling, cuddly Laddie, who was always here at the gate to meet me coming back from school. Dead! And those eyes and that blood were his. Perhaps I'm only sorry because he liked to walk beside me and he'd wait for me if he got ahead. It's all vanity. Vanity of vanities. I haven't any innermost feelings at all, like Magda says.'

There was a better place for grief, and that was the coal-shed at the bottom of the garden. Iris stumbled to her feet and went down the gravel path, over the rockery and across the lawn. The shed door was half open, and inside she saw – Magda, huddled in a corner, crying like any other ordinary child. Why, Magda never cried except in a rage, and if you tried to comfort her, she slammed doors. Iris crept out of sight, ashamed at what she had seen. She felt she had looked upon something not meant for

her eyes. She went crimson at the memory of that huddled figure. Magda . . . crying in the shed . . . Magda, of the cultured bottom.

Shocked and bewildered, she tiptoed reverently away.

Alla Turca

Magda is learning a new piece on the piano. She says it's from a S'norter by Mozart and it is called Allah Turker. Philip, who is only four, asks what the tune is about. Magda says don't be soppy, it isn't about anything. When she's gone I tell Philip the story, because he hoped for one. Allah is what the Arabian knights call God, and if you listen to the music, it's God in a great hurry. That's the Turker part. God is rushing off like a barbarian Turk to punish somebody for something. Then Philip listens to Magda practising and comes to tell me the story. And I say, thank you very much, Philip, I wanted to know that. He is so pleased he runs off to tell Nanny, who says quite right, it doesn't do to annoy God.

It fits in specially well because Magda mostly practises on Sunday and now she plays Allah Turker over and over again. When she gets to a knot she stops and takes a run at it, and either it comes undone or else ties up tighter. Philip and I play pretending games in the nursery until it's time for church.

'Hurry up, you two,' Nanny keeps saying, and looks out of the window to decide the weather. She has laid our best coats on the bed and Bumble's clean suit. Bumble is Philip's teddy and he always comes to church—at least, as far as the verger, who keeps him by the bellrope. Nanny says Bumble has good hearing, so he doesn't miss any of the service.

The same people walk up the hill to church every Sunday. I try and pass as many of the slow old ladies as I can, but Philip says they aren't playing it that way, so it doesn't count. They are playing the last-is-the-winner race so they're pleased if we get ahead. It's my Sunday for sitting with Nanny. Mummy and Magda are in the row in front of us. Ever since I've been eight, I've thought perhaps Mummy might be sad about me not sitting with her now I can behave, but then Nanny might be lonely if I stopped being with her. It was very bothering, but one day I

thought of taking it in turns and everything was all right again.

As soon as we're in, we look for our piles of hassocks we made last week, but they're gone. So we build some more until Nanny finishes her prayer and stops us. There are two beautiful, cushiony kneelers, very high, which the penny-collectors have. Nobody ever takes theirs away. It doesn't seem fair, though Nanny says it's because they're getting on and their knees won't bend enough. One of them is like Samuel Whiskers, with tiny, sleepy eyes, and the other is the Bold Bad Spider with polished hair and a starched moustache.

Some old ladies pray so well that it looks as if they haven't any heads. I count all the coat collars without necks in them. Sometimes I think of them all getting up and walking out with no heads on.

Philip collects a lot of Prayer Books and makes them into a train, which he pushes slowly backwards and forwards along the shelf thing. Nan whispers: no more than four carriages, now. He says, very surprised, but they're trucks this time, don't you see? She takes off the coal-tender and Philip bunches down on his seat and says now it can't go, you've spoilt it. Mummy looks round with her hush face and just then Philip sees another kneeler he can reach. Now he is as tall as me when we're praying.

When they stand for the first hymn, it's like a sudden forest going up. Mostly you can only see legs. Philip is a shoot and I'm a sapling. It must be difficult to balance on grown-up legs. Like the circus men on stilts. If I lift up one knee after a few prayers, the pattern of the hassock is on it. I compare it with the other knee and see which feels most bumpy. On Sundays I have pink bows on my pigtails. I flick one over my shoulder, then the other one wants to go too. It feels wrong on my ears, so I toss them both to the front without using my hands.

Most grown-ups shut their eyes very tight, so they only see dots buzzing about. I half close mine, which makes blue and orange edges and tinsel round the big lights and fairy wings round the small ones. Philip keeps asking questions, so Nanny gives him a boiled sweet and says, 'Suck, don't scrunch'. Samuel

Whiskers and the Bold Bad Spider finish their amens a teeny bit after everyone else and begin their answers first to show how important they are. If my voice fitted in with the quivery, old ladies and rumbly men, I'd have a race with Samuel Whiskers, and wouldn't he be surprised to hear me get there first! 'O God make clean our hearts with inus.' Inus must be the name in heaven for Vim.

Suddenly, there's a horrid crying sound over the other side. It's like someone choking – it's someone going to be sick – no, I can see now – it's a boy with his head right back; his eyes are jumping about and he's a green colour – oh, that awful cry again! He's fallen into the aisle. Samuel Whiskers and the Bold Bad Spider go up to him – their shoes squeak loudly – they look at him, then they whisper together. They carry him out. He doesn't move at all. His arms swing about.

'Nanny, is he dead?'

'No, of course not,' she says. 'He's only fainted.' I lean over and ask Magda.

'Is he dead?'

'Yes, of course,' she sniffs and humps round, very grown-up. I knew he was. Something strangled him. Nanny didn't want to upset me. Allah Turker has been singing in my head all the time . . . round and round it goes, faster and faster. . . . God in a big hurry to strike someone dead.

After lunch, I try to play papers in the nursery. They're in an old attaché case of Daddy's and I cut them out of Mummy's catalogues. I put the people in families and make rooms out of the furniture. Today the stories won't come. I try all the different sets but none of them work. Magda is practising again. Allah Turker . . . it goes round and round in my head and gets mixed up with my think . . . that horrible cry keeps sounding again . . . you can't escape God in a hurry . . . don't know which is Allah Turker and which is think . . . it's all tangled up together.

It's Sunday again but it doesn't feel the same as usual. Philip wriggles away from Nanny and counts the flowers on my hat. There are forty-three. He dresses Bumble slowly and then we

start. The old ladies are crawling up the hill like snails in a line, and I don't want to race them. It isn't even fun with the kneelers. I must watch everyone carefully, all the time. . . . There are lots of white faces today . . . the pews are full of the sort of faces that might start groaning . . . I mustn't shut my eyes even a little . . . people keep swaying on their kneelers, and hotness rushes up to my hair, but they balance again. Allah Turker is starting very softly. Someone starts a throat noise, but it turns into a cough . . . all the white faces are turning into that boy's face . . . my knees won't stop shivering . . . Allah Turker thunders in my head . . . God feels only round the corner now. Nanny! I want to go out. Quick – Nanny!

Nanny takes me out. The verger stares at me crying into my hanky with 'Sunday' on it. Philip doesn't ask why. Nanny talks a lot all the way home, but I can't hear it properly. She must be worried about missing the service because she thinks a lot of God. What will Mummy say? You never know with her. My inside is jumbling about like marbles in a cocoa tin. I'm so miserable, I can't play with anything. When Mummy comes in I'm so ashamed I want to cry again.

'Darling,' she says, 'don't worry. You needn't go to church any more until you feel like it. Now forget all about it.'

That's funny. She knows.

'Silly ass,' snorts Magda, 'I wasn't afraid. You're dippy.'

Nanny comes in to lay the table and I can tell that Mummy has told her. She doesn't look pleased.

'Nan,' I say, 'I'll have a service of my own, here in the nursery. All the dolls can come.'

Philip says, 'Bumble might like that for a change. I'll think about it.'

Nan still looks quiet.

'It'll be exactly the same as being at church.' I explain.

'Well,' she says, holding up a glass to see the fluffs, 'perhaps it'll be better than nothing.'

This Sunday, I watch everyone getting ready except me. I wave them all good-bye, then go into the nursery. The sixteen

dolls and Bumble are sitting in rows, waiting for me to begin my service. I read it all through from the Prayer Book and choose the hymns I like best. But I keep thinking of Philip and Nanny and wondering if they're at the same bit as me. When I get to where the sermon should be, I'd like to tell the dolls something exciting, like the Axe of the Apostles, but I don't know that one, so it has to be Jonah.

I'm finished long before the others come home and I keep imagining them sitting in church without me. There's nothing much to do, really, but there *is* Mrs Tarleton in the kitchen. She's doing the rolling-pin and making her pastry faces.

'Well!' she says, seeing me half round the door, 'Fancy! And what may you be doing at home?'

'I don't go to church nowadays.' I explain.

She says, 'Fine thing, I *must* say! I don't know, I'm sure'.

So I go back to the nursery and think about Nan and Philip, and Magda and Mummy in the row in front. It isn't much fun being left behind. The gate squeaks! I rush out to meet them all and tell them all the things I can remember that happened while they were away.

Philip says, 'You were silly not to come, Iris. Samuel Whiskers tripped over an old lady's umbrella and he dropped the penny bag. It went crash!'

'No, it didn't,' says Magda. 'It went thud.'

'It went crash, 'scuse *me*,' says Philip, 'and I laughed and everyone frowned at me instead of Samuel Whiskers. He was a clumsy-careless, wasn't he, Nan?'

'Yes,' says Nanny 'But you shouldn't laugh in church. God doesn't like it.'

'Oh, I wish I'd seen him!' I shout. 'If only I'd been there!'

'Oh,' says Nan, looking pleased, 'then you'll be coming with us next Sunday?'

Just then, Magda starts playing Allah Turker. I stop being excited. Everything is horrid again. The white face . . . the choking sounds . . . Allah Turker. . .

'Have I got to, Nan?'

‘Oh, no,’ she says, disappointed. ‘No, you haven’t *got* to.’

If only she didn’t mind so much. I can’t understand. The happiness is spoilt either way. It’s not the same any more.

Breakfast in Bed

This morning I woke up very early. There was an excitement in the silence. Everything was quiet, but the house wasn't asleep, only the people in it.

I could see Philip curled up like a hedgehog, his pink nose pressing into Bumble, his bear. His eyelashes made little fans on his face. He breathed in short puffs, pushing the air out quick. In the other bed was a whale, half under water. That was Nanny. It went up and down with her breathing. I could see a frizzle of fair hair on the pillow, and some of the red squiggly pattern on her cheek. The hedgehog mound went up and down like a feather, the whale rose and fell slow, and heavy. The hedgehog tried to see how many breaths he could fit in between the huge whale ones. His face looked surprised, as if he wondered why he was wasting so much time asleep. His eyebrows were tugging to open his eyes. But the whale's eyebrows pressed down to keep on sleeping, as though she was running a race with her tiredness. The clock ticked in her ear: 'Hurry up! Hurry up! Quick now! Quick now!'

If I sit up and press my ear to the wall, I can hear Mummy and Daddy snoring on different notes. I know which snore belongs to which, but Philip sometimes tries and he doesn't, and Magda tries from her room on the other side of Mummy's room, and she says they're both the same. I listened in this morning, and gave Mummy her snore because it's ladies first, and then I gave Daddy his. But they don't make a pattern together. It's just all anyhow. When I was young, I thought if I listened long enough they would get tired of being higgledy-piggledy and join up somewhere and make sense. But they haven't, yet.

It felt funny, being awake in the middle of so much sleep. Usually I hear Philip talking to Bumble, and the scrappy noise of May doing the stove downstairs; the rattly bang of a door, footsteps along the landing – slish-slosh of slippers, or the

clacking sound of busy shoes; the creaks and squeaks of stairs and boards making shapes and colours in the air. Then you know another day has begun, and your inside feels all ready.

But this morning, it was different. The day was on tiptoe, waiting to be started; waiting for the first yawn, and the first scrunch of a mattress, the first slap of bare feet on the linoleum. And now it was looking at me. I felt it smiling, and beckoning to me. 'Start me!' it said. 'How?' I said, because grown-ups always start the days going, and then we join in when they say so, like stepping on to an escalator. 'Oh . . .' shrugged Thursday, *'you know. . . '*

But I didn't. I lay down and thought, but I was too fidgety. It was uncomfy, being half in and half out. Well, someone would wake up soon. I thrummed my nails on the bed-post. Everything waited. I screwed up my eyes and made orange and green colours down the slit of light between the curtains. Everything watched. I pretended not to know. I thought about everyone getting up, and doing things, and once they start, they never stop. All day long, they're keeping the day running. If they stopped cleaning and cooking, and washing and mending, the day would stop too, and then where would we be?

Sometimes, I suddenly feel shut out. I try to get in, and help, but Daddy says: 'No. The maid does that.' Mummy says: 'Run along and play, darling. We have servants to do the work, silly-billy!' Nanny says: 'Well, I'd love you to help me, but I don't think Mummy would.' So I say: 'Why?' And Nanny looks misty, and begins a sentence which floats away from her. Yesterday, I just begged and begged her to let me help with the beds, and I was a nuisance, so at last she did. It was lovely. We stood one each side of my bed, and Nan told me what to do. We folded and flung, and smoothed and tucked. I was so happy, and Nanny was chuckling a lot and shushing herself and saying: 'It's a secret!' biting on the last 't' like she always does. I knew they'd enjoy it, if only they tried letting me in. And just as we were having fun punching Philip's pillow, Mummy came in. She looked at us, and her face rolled up a ball of frozen politeness and threw

it at Nan, so that I wanted to jump in front and catch it instead. 'Gracious me!' Mummy said, with a little wrung-out laugh, 'what *are* you doing, darling?' 'Helping Nan,' I said, but the bounce in my voice had got ironed flat, and there was such a thickness all round me that I had to slap my arm floppily against my side, over and over again. Then Nanny said quietly: 'Run along now, Iris, I'll finish off.' Her face was all red and closed, as if she'd been caught doing something wrong.

So I lay in bed, remembering how exciting it had been, and how sort of holy I'd felt inside. And I looked at the mound of tired old Nan who does helpful and friendly things all day long. . . . Kind old Nan, who sends parcels to poor children, and writes long letters to old ladies. . . . Clever old Nan, who shied three coconuts with three balls at the fair, then gave two away to sad mothers with pramfuls of sad children. . . . Soon the alarm will scream in her ear, and she'll heave over like an ocean and bonk its button. Then she'll scratch her head and shake it to stir up the thoughts. She'll reach for the tumbler and pop in her teeth with a click and say: 'Well, would you believe it?' snapping off the 't' like a piece of biscuit, 'half-past already, and I don't seem to have been asleep any time at all. . . .' She'll yawn and blink and stare round the room. She'll say: 'Well, this won't do!' That's where she gives her first chuckle of the day, and when she's out of bed making a shivery noise, she tells us the funny dream she had last night. She looks it up in her dream book, but it's never there. Then she dresses underneath her nightie which bulges and billows, swallowing the clothes one by one, and suddenly, out steps Nan, quite dressed, like magic. She brushes her frizzly hair, and it crackles. 'Oh!' she cries, 'frost in the air again!' She goes downstairs to tidy the nursery and get our breakfast ready, and her laughing with May comes up through the door like a warmth. Mummy has her breakfast in bed. . .

'That's nice,' whispered impatient Thursday, 'breakfast in bed. That's a special treat!'

I looked at the heaving whale, and I listened to the hurrying clock. Very quietly, I slid out of bed, put on my slippers and

dressing-gown, and crept out of the room, downstairs to the kitchen. I pulled back the curtains very slow, and in tumbled the sunshine, springing on to the table, and tickling everything awake. How surprised the kitchen was to see *me*!

'And what may *you* be doing in here?' it asked in May's thick voice. I tried not to look too important, because that's Showing Off, so I swung my dressing-gown cord and whispered:

'I'm going to give Nan breakfast in bed!'

'Very nice I'm sure,' the kitchen said sniffily, 'but that won't get our grate cleaned and our boiler stoked and our floor swept. Some people have nothing better to do than sit gossiping over cups of tea. . . . And if your Mum catches you in here talking to me—'

'Oh, yes!' I cried, 'I must be quick! Where are the things kept? How do you *do* breakfast in bed?'

Just then, Fizz the cat unrolled himself. He twisted his head round on his cushion and looked at me upside-down, for a change.

'Use your common sense!' he yawned, and then sitting up straight, he stared at Mummy's tray all ready on the table. So I found another tray, a nice green one, and began to copy Mummy's. I chose a pretty cloth with pink and blue daisies on it. Magda did that for Needlework, at school I shook some corn-flakes into a bowl, cut some bread, put on the kettle, and poured milk into the nursery-rhyme jug. All the time, my thoughts were scurrying round in my head like beetles, trying to get everything right. I was so excited my teeth kept chattering. I had started the day going, all by myself! Now everyone would step on to *my* escalator. A special surprise for dear old Nan. . . .

It took ages going upstairs, one step at a time, so as not to spill anything. When I was standing beside Nanny's bed, it was five minutes before the alarum should go off. I held out her teeth and whispered:

'Nan! Wake up!'

I was nearly bursting with huge love. Nan rolled over. But as soon as her eyes hit the tray, they unscrewed in a flash, and she shot up in bed.

'Oh, my goodness!' she said, popping in the teeth, and munching a bit. 'Oh, my lor, whatever is it?'

'It's your breakfast, Nan!' I giggled, wanting to spend a sudden penny. But instead of the chuckle and the wide-open eyes I expected, she jumped out of bed in a terrible muddle, smacking the clock, and rustling her clothes and not finding anything.

'Quick!' she said, 'take it down at once – before anyone sees put it all away!' She flew at the curtains, and Philip sat up and shouted: 'Boo! I was awake for simply hours!' because he always likes to be first.

'Oh, but Nan!' I said in a button of a voice.

'Do as I say!' she said, whirling round in another circle.

'I was only pretending!' roared Philip.

'But why, Nan?' I asked, going to the door, 'I wanted to surprise you. I thought you'd be pleased. And so would God.'

So then Nan stopped rushing, and her face went misty, because she thinks the world of God.

'Oh dear, and so He would,' she said, 'I really was pleased, Iris, and it would have been lovely to have breakfast in bed. But you see . . . Mummy . . . and after all, I'm paid to get *your* breakfast . . . might think I was making a slave of you . . . bullying . . . wouldn't understand. . . .'

The sentence went fainter and fainter, and floated out of the window.

'Nanny-fell-Nanny-fell-Nanny-fell-Nan!' Philip said in a squeaky voice going down lower and lower. 'Pop! Bang! Crash!' he shouted. Nan's nightie gulped down her corsets, and billowed hard to digest the suspenders chiming like fairy bells. There was a fog in my head, but wrapped up small inside it was a feeling that Nan might get into trouble, and it'd be my fault. I had been silly.

I tiptoed downstairs, and put the surprise back. Fizz watched me, but he didn't say anything. The kitchen watched, too. It said: 'I told you so, Miss Clever!' I picked a few cornflakes off the floor and ate them for safety. I wiped some tears out of the cup, and washed up the milk jug, so that nobody would ever find out what I had done.

On my way back, I met May. She said:

'Oo-er! And what may you be doing up so bright and early, miss?'

I said: 'I had a little pain.'

'Oo dear!' said May, 'you do look a bit peaky, I must say. You'd best hop back to bed for a while.'

So I did. I lay and listened to Philip telling Bumble a long furry story, while Nanny and May were busy starting off the day. But Thursday wasn't interested in me any more.

A Small Miracle

Out of the gate ran Iris, her feet tingling with expectation. The edges of her mind felt sharp and bright. She zigzagged across the road so as to jump over as many puddles as possible. Passing the white bungalow on the corner she plucked a dusty laurel leaf, then ran on. Each garden down the hill poured its own special scent over her like a blessing.

She should have thought of the Vicar weeks ago. He was the obvious solution. She only had to tell him her great revelation and he would explain the meaning. He would tell her what she must do. Most important of all, he would believe her, and rejoice.

Ever since it had happened she had known no peace. Well, there hadn't been much peace before, but now it was worse because she should be feeling the tremendous elation which had been there for a few brief hours.

The nuns at her Convent school talked a lot about sin, in their brooding way. They were always saying darkly it isn't so much what you do or say, but what you think – and half the time you can't spot those and there they are, miles of invisible sins stretching back down the years, ten years in Iris's case. Each had to be answered for on the Day of Judgment. It was a terrible thing. Iris imagined God pointing His giant finger and rumbling:

'May 3rd of that year, half-past two, you looked at That Part of a dog and thought it funny how it wagged.'

Yes, the Sins of Thought were the deadly ones. The nuns said that mere confession wasn't enough, you needed to mortify your flesh. God was like Sister Edith who could make the whole class squirm by calling them 'Mothers' dainty darlings' in her acid voice. She sneered at their Winter extras and said hot-water bottles were Satan's invention.

Iris thought if only she could purge herself of the ten years of hidden sins, then it would be easier to keep up to date. Not being

a Roman Catholic, she couldn't just go to confession, and anyway, she was sure life wasn't as easy as that. Sin was a personal matter between God and Man. So she refused hot-water bottles all the Winter, and before going to sleep walked on the lino in bare feet, no dressing-gown. She didn't get into bed until the awful cramp started, and then she lay urging on the pain to eat up the old sins. She mortified her flesh other ways too. She had second helpings of rotten stuff like spinach and baked custard. She closed the nursery windows and burned her last year's galoshes in the grate, kneeling over the fumes and breathing them in.

When she felt she had caught up, the real tribulation began. You see, she had to lie in wait for her bad thoughts, she had to watch herself thinking. It was like an endless nightmare. Her thinking grew worse every day. Torrents of nasty ideas broke through the wall she was feverishly building against them, so that she could never make it high enough. Whenever anyone said anything she thought at once what it mustn't remind her of, and then it was too late. It had. It was impossible to walk to school without seeing messes and thinking what they were. And how unfair it was that animals didn't wear clothes. Each night she lay awake in anguish, appalled at herself, realizing that this must go on until she died.

On Good Friday she went to the whole of the three hours' service. The crucifixion story always made her sick with horror. She got pains in her forehead at the crown of thorns part, and stabbings in her hands and feet later on. Her heart felt it was being dragged out with pity and shame, because she was frightened of the smallest pain. It was far worse this year, now she knew so much more about the sins for which Jesus died. Why did everyone want so badly to eat His flesh and drink His blood? That was a puzzle. It made her shudder the hungry way the nuns talked about it. Like cannibals.

She left the church feeling hollow with despair. The whole dreadful service had seemed a reproach for her alone. The eyes of Jesus dying in there on the cross were fixed on her, all the time. She had clenched her mind tight, but even so, the church

kept filling up with hundreds of her inky black thoughts. How was she to go on living like this?

It was as she lay in bed aching with misery, that the miracle happened. The crucifix on the wall opposite lit up with a great light. It was the whitest and most brilliant light she had ever seen, but her eyes were not at all dazzled. After a minute, the light faded, but the room was full of peace. She fell asleep at once.

In the morning she woke up feeling new. She remembered. A tremendous excitement burst inside her and spread all over her body. How impossible it was to understand why she had just gone to sleep like that, without feeling anything. So matter-of-fact, and how rude, too. She sent up a tiny apology, and to her surprise it flew out of her head quite easily. She hadn't dared to pray for a very long time. She dressed quickly, her hands fumbling and trembling, and ran to tell Mummy about the strange and beautiful vision. But the words in their urgency tumbled out any old how, and Mummy couldn't understand for ages. When at last she did, she smiled her faraway smile and said:

'How lovely, darling. But are you sure you didn't dream it? It's easy to think—'

'Oh but I know! I know!'

'Getting drowsy, perhaps?' Mummy pursued, almost anxiously. You would have thought she didn't want it to be real. Iris described it again, slower this time. Mummy said hopefully:

'It could have been the light from a car when it swung round that corner.'

'No, no!' Iris was desperate now. 'I know those sort. They sweep across the room, they light it all up for a second. This was just the shape of the cross, and the light didn't spread out.'

'Yes. . . .' Mummy sounded miles away. 'Lately I've been thinking you looked a little run down, darling. Perhaps a course of iron. Or say some yeast.'

'I saw it. It happened.'

Iris banged her side with a stiff arm.

'Of course —' Mummy's face cleared — it may have been a psychic light. I'll ring up Granny.'

Granny read tea-cups and dreamed about horses who sometimes won.

'You don't believe it,' Iris said slowly.

'Oh, but I do, darling. I think it's lovely. And there was that goblin you saw. . . . Oh heavens, I do hope there isn't a poltergeist in the house. They say it's always a child . . . I wonder if I should ask Mrs. Pettigrew to tea . . .'

And that was the beginning of the bewilderment which thickened like a fog as the days passe¹. Nobody saw the hugeness. Such a simple miracle, and they had to look at it standing on their heads. They were all very interested – the medical uncles pulled down her eyelid – it was like a murder to be solved – but they couldn't see. Sometimes they were so maddening it was like a tickle too far down the back of the throat. Other times Iris just felt helpless against grown-up reasoning, their taking-for-grantedness, their sweet smiles which shouted 'what a delightful imagination she has! Really, I think she'll write.'

But it was like a sharp pain when they put the goblin beside the Light. Nobody had believed her then, though it wasn't important and she hadn't minded much. After all, one doesn't expect grown-ups to believe in fairies, but when it comes to God . . . She had seen the goblin standing in the hall, and the surprising thing was how completely different he was from anything she could have imagined. Heaven knows, she'd tried hard enough to see one, she'd squeezed convolvulus juice into her eyes and sprinkled herbs on her hair, but when she really did, she wasn't trying at all. He was at least a foot tall, which was quite wrong for a start. He was dressed entirely in black, of all the unlikely colours. The only right thing about him was his air of impudence, his wide grin. He had stood there for a minute or two, then sort of melted away. It had been thrilling, something to treasure, something to keep taking out of her memory to look at, but that was all. Not like this. This was so big it was like one of those sudden hushes when Sister Edith threw open the door of a noisy classroom. No, it was nothing like that. All day long Iris tried to find what it was like. She was so saturated with its beauty

there was no time or room for the ugly thoughts now.

In fact, she should have been utterly happy and at peace. At least the grown-ups were kind, whereas for some reason her elder sister Magda was absolutely furious about it. She said Iris was pig and a prig. She said Iris was a deceitful little beast.

'I suppose you consider yourself Called. Well, for goodness' sake don't stand up in Form Four and speak with tongues or I'll never live it down. You don't seem to realize what a worry you are. We can't have a relation who sees things. Not that I believe you do, anyway. It's all a rotten little trick to make everyone think you're a saint.'

Iris had been too afraid of the nuns learning about it, to tell anyone except her best friend, Sarah. Being a Protestant, the nuns would consider her a Gaderene swine. But Sarah, who had known all Iris's innermost feelings for a whole year, would end the loneliness and help her to find the meaning. When Iris told her, however, she had gone all red and wriggly, almost as if it were something rude. After that, a dark curtain came between them. Sarah seemed embarrassed whenever she was with Iris. She avoided her, made more and more excuses. Yesterday she started walking arm-in-arm with Jennifer Hayward, of all the noodles to choose.

So there was no understanding anywhere. Because everyone else was behaving so oddly, Iris wondered if Magda was right, hinting at madness. And just when she'd felt herself sinking down into the blackness again, she thought of the Vicar. It had always needed a holy man to interpret the signs for the ignorant.

Not much farther to his house now. She was breathless with running and eagerness. In a few minutes, the fog would be cleared away, and her whole life changed. She could see the Vicar's kindly face lighting up as she unfolded her story. At last she would see that radiance, that recognition. She could hardly bear the waiting.

As she almost fell on the gate, fumbling with the latch – wondering why other people's gates and lavatory chains were always

so muddling – the Vicar’s rosy head appeared over a clump of bushes. He had been doing a little weeding, he said.

‘I have something to say,’ Iris mumbled. Suddenly she was all itches and twitches. She was so nervous, speaking of such holiness to a holy man. It seemed such cheek. She stared first to one side of him, then to the other, blurting out sentences, weeping inside because it should be sounding smooth and flowing like a broad river widening to the sea.

Now and again she glanced up at the face bending forward to hers. She saw the usual blank expression, eyes blinking with the effort to appear interested, then slowly the mist cleared, a look of relief swam over, the head nodded wisely. Next time she looked, some of the kindness had gone away. Instead there was that faintly disapproving look, the one they saved for one’s silly moods, one’s showing-offness.

The Vicar stared over her head, and tried to cover his distaste with a smile.

‘If I were you,’ he said, ‘I’d run along and enjoy yourself, and forget all about it.’

Out of Sight

At the end of the Christmas term there's a concert. The elocution pupils have to recite, and the music pupils have to play. There's dancing too, and the Seniors do something in French. Magda and I always played a piano duet. Miss Drew thought it a nice idea, sisters doing this, and all the nuns smiled to each other when we walked to the piano together. Then I felt proud, and all squirmy pains inside me melted away. I was important, being related to the best pianist in the school. Mummy says Magda has a great gift, and Granny says it's from her side of the family.

Miss Drew has a red pimple half-way down her hooked nose, her very short hair sticks out fuzzily at the back. Her eyes are large and popping out, her mouth is small and always a little open, ready to say something sarky. She likes Magda because they both have tempers. Mummy says Magda's is a quick temper, not a bad one, that's entirely different. Miss Drew has such a thin cover over her crossness you can never feel comfy on the piano stool, as if it was all prickles. She doesn't like me because I cry at her lessons, Mondays and Fridays. But on Tuesdays and Thursdays she teaches Magda, and after those lessons they both look washed.

If I say to Magda 'have you got a pash on Miss Drew?' she flares up.

'Just the sort of sloppy thing a sloppy ass like you would say. I understand Miss Drew. She tells me her innermost feelings, not that you'd know what those mean.'

'Does she ever say anything about me?'

Then Magda laughs like a horse not amused.

'We agree with each other absolutely on that subject. It's as rotten for her having to teach you as it is for me having to hear you practising every evening. Miss Drew has depth. You're so shallow it makes me sick.'

Whenever Magda calls me that I see a lovely warm pool cud-

dling in a rock like a baby, with sun shining through to the wrinkly sand, and tiny silvery ripples moving across. Shallow. It's beautiful. I don't honestly think much of deep, which has hard edges, but I am careful to look sorry or Magda would call me something else, one of those stinging-nettle names.

In the Summer holidays Magda got very thick with our cousin Claude, who is sixteen. He has lived abroad all his life, and is sort of ugly with too much brains. He talks like a book you can't understand, and Magda says he's intellectual, not that I'd know what that means. She says he is so brainy he can prove that nobody exists. He came a lot in the holidays, and every Sunday when the term started, and they played tennis or went for walks together. Afterwards Magda would stare at me with her so-jolly-well-snubs-to-you face, and as soon as Claude had gone she'd bang into the nursery and tell me how he'd said her eyes were alive or her mind was a first-class one, and she'd glare like she did when Uncle Ted said she was of an age to call him just Ted now, and when Aunt Madge told her and Mummy how her husband passed over.

People as clever as Claude make you afraid of saying something stupid, so I didn't say anything if I could help it. But he always seemed to be alone in a room when I went into it for a pencil, and then I'd have to say *Hullo*, only the word never came out whole, because Claude stares as if you were a window and through it he could see something unexpected like an elephant brushing its teeth. Sometimes this happened several times in a day, almost like a plot against me. Then one day Claude called me back – because I go out quick after I've said *Hullo* – and he said in his brainful way:

'Tell me, Iris, I'm fascinated to know what exactly it is you say when you enter a room. Is it *Oh*, or *No*? And if either, why?'

Then I felt so stupid I couldn't even remember what I did say. After that I could hardly bear to see him, but one Sunday I said 'May I be ball-boy for you and Magda?' Because I thought he'd think me clever. Claude said:

'That's very kind of you, Iris.'

When he said that, his piggy eyes slid sideways and he saw Magda's face looking tight, and he smiled.

'What an unselfish child it is,' he said in his rusty voice.

I was so honoured I couldn't breathe properly. I ran off and fetched the tennis racquets and balls, and we set off for the Recreation ground.

'I'll carry those,' Claude said.

'Oh please,' I begged, 'I like doing things for Magda. She's so brilliant. Everyone says so. I wrote a poem about her eyes being alive, like you said.'

'Shut up, you little fool,' Magda hissed, pinching me.

Claude smiled at me in a way that made me have to walk jerkily.

'Interesting. Have you written much poetry?'

'All about fairies,' Magda snapped, her voice sitting down so heavily on 'fairies' I could see them quite squashed. 'You've never read such slosh.'

'I've written a lot of poems to Magda. Of course, they're frightful really,' I explained, 'and now I'm doing a set of them on different pieces of her face. I've done eyes, nose, ears, and hair, so far. The things you say about them are very useful.'

'I'm so glad,' Claude's dry voice said, and his eyes slid sideways again. Magda was boiling now, and I knew I was batty talking to Claude at all, but so long as he was there I was safe.

'I should like to read your poetry, Iris.'

'For heaven's sake,' Magda exploded, 'don't encourage her. She's too young to realize what a fool she's making of herself talking to you about her doggerel.'

'Not at all. I find the whole relationship worthy of intensive study. Why, I ask myself, do we have a creative mind dissipating itself on sister-worship?'

'I don't think we should discuss dissipation before the child,' Magda butted in, but Claude laughed his whispery laugh and went on talking like a grown-up book about the laws of equity and feudal systems, springing up on his toes each step, nodding

his head and shoulders as if he was a donkey. Magda's eyes were like two dentist's drills boring into me, but I didn't care. I wanted to shout and dance about and do something to make the whole world turn round and look at me. I'd never felt so funny before.

We came to the tennis courts, Claude still talking and bowing. Suddenly he looked at me and said:

'Well, haven't you anything to say?'

All the excitement stopped. I'd say something silly and then he'd know I didn't understand. Then my tongue pushed out a lot of words very fast.

'I liked what you said about nobody existing because you see I often have funny happenings when I'm lying down and I'm suddenly not me any more, just nothing, nobody. It's horrible really, I can't seem to find what or why I am, everything goes away.'

'This is indeed a revelation,' Claude said in a patting way, and he patted a ball with his racquet, 'not that it is surprising you should have these illusions, these mental black-outs. I'm only astonished you *ever* feel you exist as an individual—'

'Did we come here to play tennis, or would you rather send Iris home and discuss life?' Magda said in a soft rose-petal voice.

'Certainly we'll play. The primitive instincts for brutality are best expended on a tennis ball.'

For the next hour I was happy, fetching the balls, bringing them very quickly, being as nice as I could. Magda snatched hers, digging me with her nails if I wasn't careful. Claude smiled as if he was much taller than he is, and sometimes he said something so wise I felt giddy with pride. 'It's my liver again,' I thought, 'I must take a dose tonight,' and I tied a knot in my hanky.

But the most beautiful moment of my whole life came later. I knocked on the drawing-room door when it was my bedtime – Magda stays up to supper now – and said good night to her and Claude. In one hand, on a saucer, I had my orange with a hole in the top and a lump of sugar pushed inside and a teaspoon, and

in the other I had my exercise book of poems. There were fifty-two now.

'Here they are,' I said, going all jerky again, 'the ones dedicated to Magda start on page thirty-nine.'

'I am much indebted to you,' Claude said, taking the book. 'This child,' he said to Magda, 'has depth.'

Then I just wanted to take the lovely purple word – because you see I found depth was not the same as deep – and run away and hide with it while it was still warm. But when I tried to find the doorknob, Claude called me back.

'I have never heard you play the piano, Iris. It would please me very much if you'd do so now.'

Another black pit came and stood in front of me. Something always snatches away a too-big happiness.

'I couldn't. I'm so nervous.'

'Why?' Claude asked.

That's the bothering thing about Claude. He wants reasons for everything. He says, 'what exactly do you mean by ...' and when at last you find an answer he says 'you may *think* you think that, but ...'

'I just am. It's all right if there's nobody near enough to hear me playing. I'm so bad. Beside Magda, specially. How can you want to hear me play when she's here? She's marvellous. You should hear the Beethoven she's on now.'

'I hear Magda every time I come. Today I want to hear you. I am intrigued.'

'It'll only be an easy piece,' I said, opening the piano, and feeling quite ill. Just as I'd thought, there was a bilious attack on the way. All this time Magda was sitting with her eyes popping out like Miss Drew's.

'The only piece I'm nearly sure of is called "Prince Charming".'

Magda snorted.

'Make the most of him, dear,' she said, 'he'll be the only one you'll ever know.'

Claude was sitting on the sofa beside her, his thin legs plaited together and the rest of him rocking backwards and forwards. He

looked at Magda, then at me, and his fat lips went curly, but not in a proper smile, just the shape of one.

‘I should like to hear you play some Bach.’

Then Magda gave a shout, meant to be a laugh.

‘She isn’t allowed to play classics! Miss Drew is too musical.’

Claude went on swaying backwards and forwards. Like a cobra going to strike, I thought, except it should be sideways. I sat down, and played Prince Charming as well as you can with jelly fingers and all your thoughts mixed up with worry. When the last chord died away into a furry hum, I didn’t dare to look round or stand up. But I shut the piano lid in case he thought I was expecting an encore.

‘I am astounded,’ the rusty voice whispered, ‘what a touch! What feeling! Why do you hide your light under a bushel? You play exquisitely, my child.’

‘Oh no,’ I said, very shocked, because nobody says things like that in front of Magda. It just isn’t done. ‘Magda is the pianist of the family. You should hear her Brahms.’

‘I have,’ Claude said, ‘I was nearly projected through the window.’

‘Yes, isn’t it? She has passion. My playing is just feeble. Ask anyone.’

‘The evidence of my ears suffices. Passion, my dear Iris, is not everything, though the young are inclined to think so. Tenderness and a gentle touch express all that is essentially woman.’

‘Well, good night,’ I said, for now the air was so thick with what had boiled over in Magda I could hardly move.

Upstairs in bed I ate my orange, scooping out the juice, pushing the lump of sugar lower and lower with the teaspoon, but before it quite finishes I pick it out and scrunch it up. When I remembered what Claude had said great bulges of excitement swelled me out, and then Magda’s furious face pricked them like a pin. I knew I would never forget this day. Nobody could take it away, not even Magda. It was like indelible ink.

Magda wouldn’t look at me the next day. She didn’t answer when I spoke to her. So I said:

'I'm sorry if Claude upset you yesterday, Magda.'

And she roared:

'Go and boil your head!'

Then a terrible thing happened. I giggled. You see, usually I do what Magda says, straight away, but this time it would have been so funny if I had. Magda stared at me, her face going redder and redder, and I couldn't stop seeing myself on tiptoe by the kitchen cooker boiling my head in the cabbage saucepan. Magda said 'you'll be sorry for this' and rushed out, slamming the door.

Later on, when I went into the kitchen to ask Mummy about my algebra – it's no use asking Magda, and Daddy has quick methods which take so long – she darted her eyes from side to side and then said:

'I do think Claude is the limit.'

I said oh why, and she glanced over my head and sort of under my plimsolls, and gave a light laugh which means something heavy underneath.

'All that nonsense yesterday. Trying to make Magda jealous. That's all it was, you know. An act. Studying her reactions, paying you compliments just to see how Magda took it. I call it nasty. Poor Magda is frightfully hurt.'

'Yes,' I said, and I spun round on a toe, it makes a nice squeak on the lino. Mummy went on spanking some batter in a bowl, not looking at me, like Magda. So I thought I'd miss out that equation.

Miss Drew told me about the duet, after half-term. Last year we'd played a Moscovski Spanish dance, the easiest one of course, because of me. This time I'd been hoping we'd do another one. This was my one chance in the year to play real music.

'You'd better buck up and master the right hand of this piece,' Miss Drew said one Friday, 'since you'll be playing it for the concert.'

I looked at her face, not understanding, thinking it was a joke. Usually I only dare to look as far up as her chest. I like watching it jogging up and down when she's hurrying across the courtyard.

Miss Drew's face went far away, like it does when she's trying hard to like me for a minute.

'Magda is playing a Spanish dance with me, this time,' she explained, 'it'll give her a chance to show off a bit!' She began a laugh which fell to pieces.

'Did Magda ask to be excused from me?' I said.

'Well, after all, she is a Senior now. Let's try the right hand again, slowly,' she said in a rush.

'Yes,' I said, and stretched out my hand for the octave. Inside me there was a huge space.

Nothing else was said about it, or not in a straight line. But all the talking between Magda and Mummy about the duet came at me like darts. Magda went about looking important and very washed. Every Tuesday and Thursday I imagined her and Miss Drew sitting together playing the most difficult Spanish dance, smiling proudly at each other, glad of each other. Every week their duet pulled them closer, like I used to think our duets would for us. After tea I practised my piece called 'Waltz' and then did my homework in the nursery while Magda practised the top half of their duet.

'It's coming on,' Mummy would say to her, and Magda would say:

'Oh well, I feel inspired, playing with Miss Drew.'

'Your piece is improving too,' Mummy said like a PS., so that I knew Magda had told her how uppish I was getting lately and how her playing with Miss Drew would take me down a peg and a jolly good job too.

Sometimes when I played 'Waltz' I thought about playing it at the concert, all alone, no Magda beside me. But I couldn't see the picture, it wasn't real. A few weeks before the day, Miss Drew was quite kind at our lesson, though it was as if she was dragging her kindness up from her shoes to her mouth.

'I think,' she said, 'perhaps you'd better drop the "Waltz", it's getting stale, and do "Prince Charming" instead.'

I felt emptied out. I had never played it since that day with Claude.

On the day of the concert the proud desks in Form Three were pushed against the walls as if they didn't matter. Nobody took any notice of them. Everyone giggled a lot, the dancers kept fussing their costumes and admiring someone else's clothes, swinging themselves from side to side. All the faces looked expecting. Magda's was like an angel. Miss Drew stood by the door leading on to the stage, a sheet of exam paper in her hand. She was dressed very smart, with earrings and lipstick, and her mouth was open extra wide. You could hear the audience like a sea murmuring. When Miss Drew called a name and opened the door, the sea rose higher. I sat on a desk lid, holding 'Prince Charming', swinging my legs. Sister Margaret kept putting the little ones in rows, but they were too excited hopping about, and pushing each other.

Miss Drew came back from playing for the Scottish dancers, and beckoned to Magda. I didn't know she could smile like that. Magda moved as though she was going to be crucified and couldn't wait. They went through the door.

When Sister Margaret turned round to see to the little ones again, I slipped through the door and went on to the stage and peeped through a hole in the curtains. The piano is down in front. Miss Drew and Magda were sitting on one piano stool, their behinds touching. Magda was making her jaw long, like she does when carried away by music. Miss Drew's mouth was wider open than I'd ever seen it. Her head nodded to the strong beats, ticking them off. The lovely scar't music sprang out of their fingers and whirled round the hall.

The nuns were smiling and looking at each other. Behind them were the parents. I saw Mummy, her eyes fastened on to Magda like press studs. Just before the end, I crept away. The applause smashed. I waited for Magda to come through the door, and said:

'Jolly well done! It was marvellous!'

'Oh shut up!' she hissed, 'can't you see I'm in another world? Trust you to spoil everything.'

There was a ballet dance next, then a recitation. Then Miss

Drew called my name, and she looked tired. If only she had let me play before *them*. No wonder she couldn't smile.

'Off you go,' she said, 'and for heaven's sake don't use the pedal.'

I walked on to the stage and down the little ladder. There were millions of eyes watching me. There were millions of ears full of the Moscovski. 'What feeling! What exquisite touch!' Claude's voice scraped. 'It was all an act,' Mummy's echoed lightly.

And then, somebody else stepped into my body, and walked with my legs. They walked them down the side aisle, past the nuns, past the rows of parents, right to the very back of the hall, behind everybody, where there is an old tinny piano. They opened out 'Prince Charming', and pulled out the stool. They took my hands and put them on the starting notes.

A hand touched my arm. It belonged to Sister Thérèse.

'Why are you here? That's the piano, down there, in the front.'

Somebody moved my head and sent my eyes to see. Then they went away. And I was back again, sitting at the wrong piano behind the audience. Heads were turning to stare. There was whispering passing over the rows like wind ruffling a field. What a feeble ass. She must be batty.

I stood up and folded the music, shut the piano, and walked down the long aisle. My shoes crashed on the floor. I walked past the parents. 'What a stupid fool,' their eyes were snapping, 'I pity her mother.' 'Ah yes,' Claude's rusty voice said in my ear, 'most interesting. But *why*, my dear child? Why did you do it? You must know the reason.' But there was only a huge space.

I sat at the proper piano. The whispers died away, and there was a silence like a pane of glass. I looked at my left hand, the thumb just over C, and at my right hand, three fingers ready. They had to smash the silence.

Something pulled my head to see the curtains. Between them, in the middle, was Miss Drew's head, all by itself, as if it was stuck on the end of a clothes prop. Her eyes were bursting, her face was purple like a beetroot. Her mouth was fixed open, and she couldn't blink. She was disgraced.

My hands began to play 'Prince Charming'.

Bosom Friend

'Well, have a nice time, darling, and don't forget to thank Mrs Weatherby-Monkton for having you.'

I wave good-bye to Mummy, and walk up the drive to the enormous house where Eleanor lives. She's my best friend, and I always stay with her for a week-end in the holidays. She isn't allowed to stay with me, because she's delicate. We used to pretend we were twins, but now we're eleven Eleanor says it's babyish. I suppose it is.

The red gravel makes a lovely crunch. It looks like ginger biscuits but sounds like the pink sugary ones with animals on them. I have my pyjamas and things in my school case. Nanny gets very fussed when I stay with Eleanor. Nothing must have darns or look old, and I mustn't say I'm wearing Magda's tartan skirt handed down.

Eleanor's watching for me from the nursery window upstairs. She waves and vanishes. She'll be in the hall by the time I get there. . . . Yes! She's jumping up and down and squeaking. Her legs and arms are joined on loosely. She walks with one arm bent up and the hand dangling from the wrist as if it didn't belong. She gives me a wet kiss. I'd know her taste anywhere. Once when we were seven, we tried each other's tongues and hers was sour, but she said mine was sour too. It tastes all right to me.

Mrs Weatherby-Monkton asks how my mother and father are. I say, 'Quite well thank you,' and she says she's so glad. Eleanor pulls me upstairs, and I sniff the house. It's a pale primrose smell. There are no small friendly rooms, only huge ones which make you feel like a dot. Nanny's sister's cottage in the country has a beautiful crimson-lake smell, and the tiny rooms are so kind they seem to hug you.

Eleanor's nursery is full of the biggest toys. It's like walking round Gamages before Christmas. I go straight to the Wendy

House and tap the little knocker. 'Oh, *don't!*' says Eleanor, 'I'm tired of the Wendy House. It's silly.' I'd like to explore the books. There are millions of them, but Eleanor hates me looking at them. One time, I simply had to take a Dr Doolittle into the lav after breakfast. After a long while Eleanor banged on the door and I said gruffly, 'Go away!' So she did. But just when I was half through Chapter Two, she battered again. 'Shut up!' I said, 'I'm coming.' I finished that chapter, and the next one wasn't so good, so I stopped. Eleanor was awfully ratty when she saw the book and she was going to tell her mother.

'Where's Mam'selle?' I ask Eleanor. 'She's gone,' she says and giggles. 'Aren't you sorry? She was so nice, and made up wonderful stories.' 'I don't mind,' says Eleanor. 'There'll be another one next week,' and she starts telling me about her progressive school. She sings me the songs she learnt last term, and I sing 'It was a Lover and his Lass'.

Eleanor's voice is like a watery line wavering up and down, but it never makes a tune. . . .

Mrs Weatherby-Monkton runs the first bath and reminds us not to use the same water because that's a revolting habit. She goes off, and Eleanor makes an awful face at the door. I show her the one Magda does at me, and she tries to copy it, but her mouth stretches a different way. I tell her about my cousin Paul who can lick the end of his chin with his tongue. . . . 'Let's dress up the taps with flannels,' I say, 'and put sponges on top for hats.' 'Don't be stupid,' snaps Eleanor, and I'm puzzled. She doesn't seem herself.

I am careful to let her win the undressing race, and she jumps into the bath squealing, 'I've won! Oo, it's hot. Turn on the cold, quick!' But I'm staring at her top half. 'Go on, slow-coach,' she shouts, 'more cold. I'll splosh it round and get it even.' I fumble for the tap, but my eyes are stuck on Eleanor's chest. 'Eleanor,' I say, 'You've got. . . .' 'I know,' she interrupts, and she swooshes water round in circles as if it didn't matter. 'But you're too young,' I say. 'No, I'm not. I'm eleven. *You* may have them some day.' 'I'm not sure I want them,' I

say. Eleanor tosses her hair out of her eyes and squeezes her lips tight. 'Mummy said we were too old to have baths together now, but I kicked up a stink until she gave in. And she said it was quite wrong for you to have baths with your brother.' 'Why?' I say, and I feel funny inside. But Eleanor isn't listening. She wants to get on with her latest loose tooth story.

I clean my teeth and keep squinting sideways at her. Queer. She's so skinny, and I'm plump. Such large floppy ones, too. Last hols she just had cowboy hats, like me. Must be heavy to carry about everywhere. You can't put them down once they're there. Doesn't seem right, on Eleanor. 'They're splendid for mothers, and the seniors at school . . . makes them look important. 'Do you still believe in fairies?' I ask her and she says, 'No, of course not.' Somehow I'm not surprised, but it's sad. 'Philip and I call them Ponkers,' I say. 'What?' asks Eleanor, trickling water down her tummy with the sponge. 'Those things you've got,' I say, pointing with my toothbrush. 'That's very rude,' says Eleanor crossly, 'I shall tell Mummy.' 'Oh, please don't!' I beg her, and she says, 'I jolly well will,' and we go on like that for a long time, all through my bath. I feel better when she puts her nightie on and I can't see them. . . .

Eleanor has a huge garden, which gives me ideas for games, but she doesn't see things like me. The best part is the shrubbery and clumps of bushes with dark shadows. I think they're full of fairies, but Mrs Weatherby-Monkton says they're full of germs, and won't let us play there. We walk all round the garden first, and I keep suggesting games to Eleanor, but she doesn't like them. At last we try the horses one, riding the bikes. Eleanor's is a frisky piebald, and mine is a gentle mare with long eyelashes. I do the snorting and whinnying and make the hoof noises with my tongue. We race round and round the lawn, up and down the narrow paths in the kitchen garden, past the garages, and back to the tennis court. Then Eleanor says it's silly, so I say why not be mothers and take the dolls out in the pram. She has a lovely pram with a canopy, and two life-size baby dolls. Eleanor

says she doesn't play with dolls now, so after kicking some stones we go into the house.

Eleanor has a funny sort of game which is creeping round all the rooms and just standing still and giggling. She never takes me into the drawing-room though, because I'd want to play the piano, and she can't bear that. We tiptoe from room to room, listening for footsteps, and planning where to hide if we're caught. We stand in Mrs Weatherby-Monkton's bedroom and Eleanor gets very excited. We go down the corridor to another room. 'This is where Daddy sleeps,' says Eleanor, holding a finger to her mouth and wobbling her eyes. I'm surprised, and say, 'My parents sleep in the same room.' 'Do they?' says Eleanor, coldly, and I think I shouldn't have said anything. Perhaps my parents are wrong about that.

Nobody comes, and Eleanor gets fed up again. We sit in the nursery and I say, 'What about the desert island game, with the table upside down?' 'That's babyish,' says Eleanor. 'Well, how about climbing round the room without treading on the floor?' 'I don't think much of *that*,' Eleanor sighs, and she sprawls in her chair, kicking at the fireplace with one foot. 'Do you remember when we used to play invisible fairies, putting bits of tinsel round us?' I say hopefully. 'Yes,' says Eleanor, 'stupid, wasn't it?'

I look at Eleanor and think, 'So that's what happens when you grow ponkers. It's a terribly awful thing.' 'We're much too old for any of those dippy games,' Eleanor says. 'Well,' I say, swallowing a bulb in my throat. 'What *would* you like to play?' Eleanor looks at me with slitty eyes, and peeps outside the door to make sure no one's about. She slops back to me, grinning secretly, and whispers, 'We might play Fat Women.'

I'm so amazed at Eleanor knowing a game that I just stare at her for a minute. 'How on earth do you play that?' I ask. 'I'll show you!' she says, bouncing on the sofa and gurgling with excitement. She picks up a cushion and gives one to me. I punch it gently while she stuffs hers under her jersey. So I do the same, and Eleanor puts two small balls of wool in place, and I copy

her. Then I look at myself in the mirror and say, 'Oh, I *see*.' Eleanor laughs and splutters, 'Isn't it funny?' 'What happens now?' I ask, trying to understand. 'Well, we bump into each other and say "Sorry", and we can't see over the top. You begin over by the window and I'll walk towards you from the door.'

We play Fat Women for ages, bumping and toppling over with our legs in the air. I don't like it much, I don't know why. Anyway, it was clever of Eleanor to think up a game on her own. She seems to enjoy it more than any of mine, so we carry on for as long as she wants to . . .

Suddenly, in comes Mrs Weatherby-Monkton, wearing her special smile for Eleanor's little friends. 'Quick!' hisses Eleanor, 'behind the sofa!' She ducks and disappears. I stand where I am, because grown-ups laugh at dressing-up games and Mrs Weatherby-Monkton will be proud of Eleanor's first invention.

Mrs Weatherby-Monkton looks at me, and her eyes glue on to the cushion ponkers, and her smile goes quite stiff. Usually she talks in a voice like pastry, but when she's angry it's a bright orange crust which breaks off in splinters and rushes at you. Eleanor comes out from the sofa without her cushion, and she stands dangling one hand with her face like cardboard. Her mother tells me I am nasty-minded and deceitful, and I only pretend to be a nice little girl. She says she's known it all along and she hopes my mother will find me out soon, for my sake. I keep murmuring I'm sorry, and I won't do it again, and I didn't mean it, but she doesn't hear. She says it's bad upbringing and you can't be too careful where there are brothers. She says it only goes to show, and what else can you expect, and lots of other things which muddle me more and more. My inside feels full of deep chords growling blackly at the bottom of the piano, with the pedal on.

Mrs Weatherby-Monkton goes out and slams the door. I fidget my knees and don't look at Eleanor. She's giggling and copying her mother in a wax. 'Oh, you vulgar little girl!' she mimics, wriggling her shoulders, 'you're such a bad influence on my daughter. She's so good when you're not here!' I try to smile, but

my mouth won't bend. If only I could be alone and read a book, or play the piano. . . .

Staying with Eleanor used to go so quickly, but now it drags. There's a horrible thickness in the air. Eleanor thinks it's funny, and I try to, but it isn't. Mrs Weatherby-Monkton is very polite, as if I was a grown-up visitor, and her face is like a statue all the time . . .

On the second-to-last day, Eleanor gets more and more hard to please, and she says, 'Why can't you stay another week? You don't *have* to go home yet.' 'You know it's my birthday next Wednesday,' I say, stroking the little-girl-doll's hair. 'Well,' Eleanor says snappily, 'I made you stay for it last year.' So I remember how she did, and how Mrs Weatherby-Monkton helped her, saying it was all very well, *I* was going home to a brother and sister, but Eleanor would be left all alone. I remembered listening to her telephoning Mummy, and then I woke up on my birthday, in Eleanor's house. It was the worst day of my life. I had to pretend it was the best, or Mrs Weatherby-Monkton would say I was selfish.

'Well?' Eleanor says, digging her chin in my shoulder and making her jaw crackle, like the Duchess in Alice. 'I'm afraid Mummy was too upset. She'd planned things. And Philip always worries when I'm here. He's afraid I love you best.' 'And don't you?' asks Eleanor, looking surprised. So I say I love her and Philip exactly the same, because she hasn't a brother and wouldn't understand. 'I think you're mean,' she says, and when I don't answer, she says all right then she'll ask her mother to make me stay another week. 'I don't think she will, somehow,' I explain. 'I'm a bad influence on you.' So then Eleanor cries with her mouth wider than you'd think anyone could, and after that she sulks and pushes me away when I try to be nice . . .

When at last I hear Mummy's voice downstairs I can hardly believe it. Eleanor begins to wail. 'I don't want you to go. Can't you stay till tomorrow?' 'I'm sorry,' I say, 'but Philip will be excited already. He gets disappointed very easily.' I put on my

coat, and I can't find the other sleeve hole for ages. Eleanor says, 'We never go down till they call, and often we don't then.' I run downstairs with Eleanor trailing behind, whining for me to come back . . . Is Mrs Weatherby-Monkton telling Mummy how badly I've behaved? I can hear them talking. What are they saying? I don't want Mummy to know. . . . 'Ah, *here* she is!' I look quickly at Mrs Weatherby-Monkton, but she's got on her Eleanor's-nice-little-friends smile again. I kiss Mummy, and she straightens my coat. . . . 'It's been lovely for Eleanor,' chatters Mrs Weatherby-Monkton, 'so few really *nice* families round here who have children of her age . . . one can't be too careful, can one? Might pick up infection or an accent . . . Children so impressionable . . . mustn't risk it . . . did you say Philip is over six now? Isn't it perfectly astonishing how time flies? Seems only yesterday . . .'

We stand around in the hall, and suddenly Eleanor grabs me and whispers, 'D'you remember when we used to pretend we were stuck to the floor, and couldn't go?' 'Yes,' I say, 'silly, wasn't it?'

I can tell by the way Mummy holds my hand on the way home that she doesn't know. I want to tell her, but I can't. My inside is still in knots. Am I somebody pretending to be me, like Mrs Weatherby-Monkton said? Or did she say I was me pretending to be someone else?

Philip is pleased to see me, and he has a lot of news. He has invented a mud pie which he says is better than any of mine. Bumble, his teddy, has lost an eye again, but Nanny is going to sew it on. . . . He says, 'Do you love Eleanor more than me?' I say, 'Of course not.' I don't know if Magda is pleased to see me. Nobody knows what Magda thinks, because she is fourteen and takes School Cert next year. She sits at the nursery table drawing horses, and slams her hand over them if we try to see. . . . Nanny asks does Eleanor wear combies or a vest, and I say 'Both'. Daddy comes in, screws up his face, salutes stiffly, and goes out. . . . The house smells just the same, and I think I'm quite me again, until Nanny says, 'Now then, you two, bath's running. Up you go.' I'm all hot and bursting, and I say in a spurt, 'Nan, is it

all right for me to have baths with Philip?' 'Who's been putting ideas in your head?' she asks sharply. 'Oh, nobody,' I say, 'I just wondered.' 'Well, none of your nonsense, then,' she says, 'I don't know, I'm sure. You're never yourself after staying with Eleanor.' So Nanny notices that I'm not me, too. I swallow a knob and say, 'Nan, when I grow ponkers, will I still have baths with Philip?' 'Oh,' she says, blinking a bit, 'I expect you'll be too big then.' 'I thought so,' I say sadly. 'No,' says Nan, 'I meant too big to fit in the bath together.' So I feel much lighter inside, and I say in a rush, 'Nan, Eleanor's got ponkers and she doesn't enjoy anything any more.' But Nan goes on looking Nan, in fact more, and says, 'You can take it from me she just needs a dose. All very fine, these French mamselles, or whatever they call themselves, and I never did think Mrs Weatherby-Monkton had much idea, for all her clever talk.' Philip has been listening with his chin on the table and his eyes bubbling. He laughs his gurgly laugh and says, 'Eleanor's won the ponker race! Eleanor's won the ponker race! So boo! Bags I tell Mummy first!'

So Nanny takes off her glasses because she always cries when she laughs. Then she says, 'Yes, you must get a move on, Iris, and catch up. Then you'll really be bosom friends!' And that is such a beautiful thought that the knots in my inside come untied. Everything is wonderful again. I'm so excited I rush after Philip to tell him that he was right that time, and Buffers is a better name after all.

The New Bear

Philip is going to boarding school. Prep school, they call it. Daddy says it'll be the making of him, and Mummy says he'll love it. But he was happy here, and now he's miserable. It doesn't make sense. For weeks and weeks they've been taking him shopping for uniform. They say: 'Such lots of new clothes! Isn't it exciting?' But Philip hates them. They're all grey and gloomy. Every evening, Nanny has been sewing on name tapes and ticking things off lists. It's horrible.

We used to have such fun, Philip and I. We played pretend games, and told each other stories. I called him Fooey, because he so was. We talked in a private silly voice, when we were alone. We had our baths together, and slept in the night nursery with Nanny. But when Philip goes to boarding school, Nanny is going away. Nothing will ever be the same. It's like a wall in front of you, and a horridness the other side which you can't see, but you know you'll soon have to. Philip wouldn't go to a party without me. His face went green and he was sick, if an invitation came just for him. Mummy had to ring up the mother and explain; then I was asked too, and Fooey was well again. He couldn't go and stay with Granny without me, and if there was room for Nanny too, that was quite perfect. We thought together, Fooey and I.

This is our last day. Philip was allowed to choose a special lunch. We looked at our plates, and then at each other, and our tummies filled up on their own. There were crumpets for tea, but they wouldn't swallow. 'What shall we p'ay?' I said, but Philip opened the toy cupboard and just stared inside, touching things, and moving things a little.

'Now then,' says Nanny, rolling up some sad grey socks, 'bath's running.'

We don't have the race upstairs. The bathroom looks tired and old too. There are the sponges to prop on the taps for hats,

and the flannels to tie round for dresses, but they don't want to play tonight. We get into the bath like grown-ups, as if it wasn't important. Usually I go down very slow, inch by inch, until there are only two dry little islands, one on each knee. Fooey crashes in with lots of noise and bubbles. When the sides of the bath are steamy, you can draw pictures, but we don't, tonight.

Philip tries some soap bubbles, but they snap before he can float them away. He says: 'Do you think we'll have our baths together next holidays?' 'I expect so, Fooey,' I say, because Mummy said not to upset Philip on his last day. But I don't really think so. 'Everything's slowing down,' says Philip, 'I do wish I wasn't going.' His mouth wobbles, so I jump out of the bath and fill the tumbler with cold water. Then I trickle it on to Fooey's tummy, and he squeals.

The water goggles away as if it was choking the drain.

'I wonder if a fat spider was walking up the pipe,' Philip says, 'and the water hooshed it down again.' 'Yes,' I say, 'it was. A fat Mrs Stella Spider —' but then the story falls out of my head and breaks into pieces. We watch the steam curling off our fronts, but it doesn't matter.

While we're reading in bed, Mummy comes in to cheer us up. She laughs like a silver bell, and talks in a bright blue voice. Our words are tied up in knots at the back of our throats. Mummy goes over to the brand new tuck box and says: 'Now, is everything in, darling? Books and games, I mean.' 'Well,' Fooey says, making a thinking face, 'I haven't quite decided yet whether to take Bumble this term, and Red Ted next, or Red Ted this term —' 'Oh, darling!' Mummy cries, 'I'm afraid you can't take any teddies.' There is a silence like a crash. Next to me and Nan, the bears are Philip's best friends. 'Why not?' he asks, in a squeezed voice. 'The other boys might laugh, you see. We'll put your toys in this bottom drawer here, until the holidays. They'll be nice and comfy there.' 'I could keep one of them hidden in the tuck box,' Philip says, watching Mummy open the drawer, 'I wouldn't take him out at all, not even at bedtime.' Mummy pops in the teddies. 'I only want him to be there,' Philip says. 'Oh no, darling! When

you get to school, there's so much to do, and such fun to be had. . . .' And Mummy tells us again how splendid boarding school is, laughing her silver laugh and making her words splash out of her mouth like water in the sunshine.

When she has gone, Philip jumps out of bed and opens the drawer a chink so that the bears can breathe. 'They'll be miserable in there,' he says, 'and awfully lonely.' 'Tell you what, Foo,' I say, 'as soon as you're . . . I mean, after tomorrow I'll take them downstairs to live with the dolls. They'd enjoy that, for a change.' Philip looks a little pleased. 'Well, so long as they don't get too girlish,' he says, 'well, I'll write and remind you, in case you forget. All the same, I don't see why Red Ted couldn't come. He's very small.' And I think the same.

Nanny hears our prayers and says good night, smiling extra widely. We lie awake for a long time, watching the rushing-around dots in the blackness. Philip keeps saying: 'Are you still awake, Iris?' And I keep saying: 'Yes. Are you?' Our beds seem farther away from each other tonight. . . . I remember that time I woke up suddenly in the middle of the night, and switched on the light quick, as if someone had told me to. There was an earwig on Philip's pillow, and I snatched it off . . . and Philip went on sleeping . . . Bumble tucked down beside him . . .

The sun is making warm puddles on the eiderdown. It's morning. Our last morning. What a funny thing! Philip is asleep in *my* bed! I don't remember when he got in. 'Wake up, Fooey!' I whisper, and he does. Then he's surprised too. He can't remember getting in, either. The same heaviness presses down on our chests. Today is the end. . . .

After breakfast we sit in the nursery, trying to play cards. The taxi should be here any minute, says Mummy. We don't look at each other now. We can't use the private speaking. It's Beggar-my-neighbour, Philip's favourite card game. If I was doing too well, he used to say: ' 'Scuse me a sec.' Then he'd hide his face in his hands and pray: 'Please God make me win.' Then we'd go on. But this morning he doesn't mind. The cards slap softly down,

one after the other, and we keep forgetting to pay when the coloured ones come. . . .

We hear the taxi scrunch up to the gate. Philip's huge tears plop on to the ace of spades. The taxi stops. I think I'm going to be sick. Fooey has been sick twice and Nanny gave him glucose. Daddy goes out to ask the driver to help him down with the trunk. Suddenly, Philip says: 'Oh! Something I forgot!' and he runs upstairs to our room. When he comes down again, he's different. There's a secret behind his face. Nobody can see it's there but me.

All the way to the station, Mummy and Daddy and Nanny are being jolly and talking loudly. It's like being rubbed on a grater. But when we're there, it's better, because they've got so much to do, seeing to the trunks and saying: 'Wait here till I come back,' or 'Don't move from this spot.' We couldn't, anyway. There's no spring in us, and all the exciting things on stations have gone away. Every time we're alone, I wait for Philip to put his secret into my hand, but he doesn't. He always has, before. . . .

On the platform are lots of boys dressed exactly like Philip, and a horrid man barking at them. 'That's Mr Conway, the head-master,' Mummy nods proudly. I knew he'd be horrid. 'Ah, the new boy!' he says to Fooey, and barks again. 'Collins! Wilson minor! This is Stewart, the new boy. Make room in your carriage.' 'Hi, you chaps!' yells a beastly little boy with freckles, 'shove over for the new bug!' Philip gets in, and Daddy makes faces at him through the window. He's afraid Philip will cry and disgrace the family, but he won't. He can't. We're all stiff and clogged up. Philip has wrapped his secret round him so that I can't get near. The other boys are very excited. They biff each other with their caps and say: 'Bags I the corner seat!' The guard's whistle cuts through my tummy. The train glides along the platform. Its wheels tear up my inside. Philip's white face is at the window. The others lean out, waving and shouting. But they don't know he's Fooey. What will he do? His face, holding its secret tight, grows tinier and tinier. He didn't tell me. It's beginning already. He'll be like the other boys, glad to be going

away. . . . He won't come back Fooley. . . . He'll be the same as the others. . . . Just school uniforms filled with noise . . . and I shall still be me. . . .

The stiffness inside me crumples up, and the tears rush out in a bunch. Nanny hurries me along. I hear Daddy growl: 'Good Lord!' and that makes it worse. Mummy's silvery voice pats n.y ear, and that makes it worse too. I think I am dying with so much hurt. 'But it isn't for *ever* . . . ' they say 'The term will pass in a flash!' they say. But they don't know.

There's no Fooley in the house now. It feels hollow wherever I walk. I shall go to bed by myself tonight, and sleep in a silent room. Next week Nanny will go, and I shall be quite alone. . . .

Suddenly, Nanny rushes into the nursery and says: 'Where's Mummy?' 'Kitchen, I expect,' I say, bumping my knees together on the floor. Then I see her face is all muddled, so I ask what's the matter. 'You know very well!' she says, 'I daresay you put him up to it.' 'What?' I ask. 'He's taken Red Ted with him, of course!' she cries, and whirls out to find Mummy.

I hear their voices in the sitting-room. Mummy gives a little scream, and Daddy growls: 'My godfathers!' They go on and on. I hear Mummy dashing this way and that, like a worried ant. But I feel cosy, tucked inside the secret with Philip, looking at it as if we shared the same eyes. There is a smoothing-over of the rawness. So that was Fooley's secret! He was quite right not to tell me. It was too important to risk. 'They'll rag him to death!' Daddy roars angrily, and Mummy gives a sort of mew.

But they didn't tease him. I asked Fooley how Red Ted got on, when they came home for the Christmas holidays. He said. 'Oh, fine! He loved it. One of the prefects, Barker major, helped me unpack, but when he saw Red Ted he pretended he hadn't. He slipped him at the back of my locker, under some clothes, and he stayed there the whole term. Barker major is a jolly decent cove. Nobody else ever knew Red Ted came to boarding school too.'

No Escape

It's snugly warm in bed. If I squeeze my eyes tight, the millions of dots rush around faster. I had ten minutes extra reading to-night. Mummy forgot to come up. She's so worried these days. Great-Uncle Basil is very ill. The telephone keeps ringing, and everyone goes about with quiet faces. Magda's very snooty because she's fifteen and Mummy tells her things. She said yesterday:

'Uncle Basil is dying.'

There are colours behind my eyes. Browns, blacks, purples, dark reds.

So I asked:

'What do they do with dead people?'

And Magda said importantly:

'They fill up their body holes.'

'Oh, how rotten!' I said.

The dark colours fold over each other and then grow paler. Streaks of yellow flash by, and smears of green go under and over, like darning.

It's an awful thing, dying. Magda's tried it. She put a pillow on her face and held her breath, to see what dying was like. I was too frightened to try. Cowardy, cowardly custard.

Great bolsters of black roll in from the sides and sweep back again.

Oh, here's Mummy. She doesn't switch on the light. She stands at the end of the bed and says in a voice like church:

'I'm afraid I have to tell you that Uncle Basil is dead.'

I can hear Magda crying loudly in the next room.

How funny. They're such easy words, but my brain can't digest them. It keeps spitting them out every time I put them in. Perhaps if I think them slowly . . .

Uncle . . . Basil . . . is . . . dead . . .

That means he's gone. He can't come back, not ever. I shall

never see him . . . staring at me. Such funny clouds in his eyes . . . such a gritty smile . . .

Uncle . . . Basil . . . is . . . dead . . .

That means he'll never watch me again . . . waiting . . . following me . . . always following me about . . .

'Yes,' Mummy says, 'Uncle Sidney rang up and told us. The end was very peaceful, he said.'

I ought to say something. What should I say? 'Poor Uncle Basil . . . ' 'Oh, Mummy, I'm so sorry . . . ' But when I open my mouth no sound comes . . .

Uncle Basil must be very dead by now. They go stiff, Magda says. They pull down their eyelids like blinds, she says. He won't get me alone ever again . . . making purring noises in his throat . . . stroking me . . . finding out about my clothes . . .

Why?

So secret . . . and whispering . . . and jumping if footsteps came . . . I was ashamed. My face burned. My inside froze.

Why?

His eyes all slitty and heavy . . . his voice all thick . . . 'don't be afraid, Iris. Don't be silly . . . Let me.'

'Yes,' Mummy says, 'we must be thankful for that, at least. Uncle Basil was very fond of us all.'

Yes, wasn't he? That did make me feel horrid. Presents . . . money . . . sweets . . . 'He's so good with the children,' they said. But watching me, all the time . . . his fingers twitching . . . waiting to touch my skin . . .

Why?

Years and years of eyes with clouds in them. . . Since I was eight . . . staring . . . frightening. . . But it won't happen again.

'Well,' Mummy says, 'I thought you'd like to know at once.'

Yes! Yes, I did like to know at once, because you see, Mummy, I'm different. I'm out. He can't—

But good gracious, I should be crying! Mummy will be ashamed of me. Magda tells her how I have no innermost feelings, like she has. We must love our relations. They love us. They're kind, and good. Relations always are. Yes, I must certainly cry. Now. It's

easy. I often do. I cry when Uncle Basil – but I forgot. That won't ever happen again. Oh, what a terrible big happiness is rolling round my tummy! I must stop it. Where is my sadness . . . the heaviness . . . the pulling at my chest . . .

Mummy goes out and shuts the door quietly. I didn't cry. I didn't even say anything. Magda is still crying – so well, too. It's always been easy before.

'Look,' I said to Jane Pearson, 'I can cry whenever I want.'

'Bet you can't!' she scoffed.

So I showed her. I explained how to do it. You only have to think hard of eyes following you . . . doors opening when you're in bed . . . hands groping . . .

'Oo, aren't you spooky?' said Jane Pearson, 'here, you girls, Iris can cry to order. Watch her!'

I'm famous for it. It's the best thing I do.

Well, what can have happened? Such a new dryness in my eyes. They feel quite drained. It's not too late, though. If I do it now, Mummy will hear, and she'll know I have innermost feelings after all. You have to cry when people die. Perhaps if I made the noises. . . . It feels so silly, with such a dryness everywhere. There should be an ache in my throat. . . . More crying noises, then . . . scrape them over my throat . . .

Oh goodness, this is terrible! Think of something sad, then. . . . What is there? Why, I can't find a single sadness to use! What am I going to do?

Uncle Basil is dead. Stiff, like a doll. Icy cold, too. Magda says. . . . They've pulled down his eyelids . . . they can't spring up again . . . and have clouds in them . . .

They've filled up his body holes, I should think . . .

Oh! What a beastly mean thing to do! Just think of it – when you can't say 'scuse me but I don't like being touched, thank you. 'Do you like that, Iris? Is that nice?' And his voice curled through his squeezed teeth . . . But I couldn't speak. I was like a dead person.

Well! Fancy that! A little brand-new tear came out all by itself. What a good thing. And my throat is quite achey with so much

trying. Well, that's better. I've been sorry. Oh, such a comfy sleepiness . . .

The dark waves plunge across . . . they swing back . . . a pale island left in the middle . . . the dark waves rush over and swallow it all up . . .

They've done the funeral. Magda was too young to go, but she found out all about it. They burnt him up, she said. Just a few ashes left which they scoop up and put in a box, about the size of Mummy's jewel case. Now there's no Uncle Basil. He left his flat in a frightful mess, Uncle Sidney told Mummy. Papers everywhere. Don't think he ever threw anything away. No sign of a will, of course. Lack of system, dear. . . . That's why everything must be gone through. 'Oh, what a job!' Mummy said, 'I'd better come and give you a hand.' 'No, dear,' Great-Uncle Sidney said, 'you've plenty to do, and Magda's working for her exam. I'll take Iris along, if that's all right.'

Mummy said: 'Do.'

So here I am, in Uncle Basil's flat. I never saw it before. It's all dust and old smells. There are piles and piles of letters and things . . . I think there are pieces of Uncle Basil hanging in the corners like cobwebs . . .

Uncle Sidney does one pile, and I do another. There are letters with dates on before I was born. There are lots of note-books with funny writing in them, and long sums, and dreams, and then it finishes up with the name of a horse.

'Did all his racing that way,' Uncle Sidney says, 'working out dreams, studying numerology, astrology, and so on. Burned incense, too. Rum chappie. But earned a modest living by his wits.'

'Look at all these bus tickets!' I . . .

'Never threw a thing away. Couldn't live like it myself,' Uncle Sidney says, throwing a pile of magazines into a corner.

Funny. I always hated tidying, and throwing away. Spring cleaning is the horriddest time of the year. All the friendliness goes. The rooms feel new and you can't get near them. But this is fun!

I *am* enjoying it! Yes, I want to make a huge bonfire of all Uncle Basil's things . . . and put the ashes in a little box – about the size of Mummy's jewel case. . . . I feel so bubbly inside, today . . . my clothes feel all loose on me . . . there's lots and lots of space round me . . .

'So full of vitality, your Uncle Basil. Seems impossible . . . but there it is. We all come to it, sooner or later. Tcha! Appalling rubbish! How anyone can live this way . . . ah, well . . . everyone to his own. . . . Yes, a great one for the ladies, your Uncle Basil. Yes, even at sixty-eight . . .'

Uncle Sidney looks sideways at me, smiling.

'Clever bounder. Must admire him. The tales he could have told! Was never found out, you know. Not once. Always remember, dear, it doesn't matter what you do so long as you're not found out! The golden rule. Best advice an uncle could give you!'

He gives a roar of laughter, and stuffs another bunch of papers into the tea chest.

'Well, that's the lot, at last. If people only realized, if they only stopped to think of the trouble their untidiness gives someone when they're gone. . . . Now, we'll take one load at a time downstairs to the dustbins.'

We go up and down the six flights of stairs, carrying all the mortal remains of Uncle Basil. And each time we come back for more, there's less of Uncle Basil left, hanging in the corners like cobwebs . . .

'What will the dustman do with all this?' I ask.

'Oh, used to it, those chappies. Cart it away. Nothing to *them* . . .'

'Yes, but where? What happens to it?'

'Oh, dump it somewhere . . . in the river, or perhaps incinerators. Yes, that's what they do. Burn it.'

So this will soon be just a few ashes, and someone will kick them with their toe, and they'll fly up in the air, and float away . . .

Now it's finished. Not a scrap of paper, not a shoe lace, not a threepenny bus ticket . . .

Uncle Sidney looks round, grunting, opening drawers, shaking dusty cushions.

The room is quite empty. Not a shred of Uncle Basil is left! My heart is bouncing. My body feels all tingly, wanting to dance and dance and dance . . .

Uncle Sidney makes a purring noise in his throat. He says:

‘Why, you’re getting quite a big girl, aren’t you, dear?’

‘Yes,’ I say proudly, ‘I’m nearly up to Mummy’s shoulder.’

‘Are you really, now? Ye-e-e-es . . .’

And then I see Uncle Sidney coming towards me. There are clouds in his eyes. His smile is gritty, and fixed, like a dunumy. His voice has gone thick.

And his fingers are itching and twitching as if they can’t wait.

Calling the Tune

Magda was a born pianist. Everyone at school talked about her virtuosity, and the nuns rambled through rosaries for her, before music exams. At home, Mummy always said:

‘Magda, do play a little piece for Uncle Sidney’ – or whoever it was. And Magda would. After the astonished exclamations had subsided to a murmuring, Mummy would say kindly:

‘Now, Iris, what about you playing something?’

That was followed by an indulgent clucking. Iris knew it was only so as not to make a difference between the sisters, which made her dread these recitals.

The awful thing was, she loved the piano. It was the only thing she wanted to shine at. It didn’t matter Magda being brainy, top in every subject, and in all the first elevens. The nuns rubbed it in, but she just thought:

‘Well, she’s three years older, so she jolly well ought to be better than me.’

But somehow, that thinking never came when Miss Drew said acidly:

‘You’ll never play as well as Magda.’

Mummy had the most beautiful soprano voice, and Magda played her accompaniments. Iris sat on the stairs in her pyjamas, when Mummy sang to friends after dinner. It was so perfect that shivers rushed up and down her spine, like a ghost playing scales on her back. Sometimes, when everyone was out, she practised the easy accompaniments furtively, deliciously, with the soft pedal on, imagining Mummy singing with her, and Magda listening respectfully. But one day, Magda caught her, and laughed, and Iris felt too ashamed of her presumption ever to try again.

‘Miss Drew is by far the best teacher I’ve had,’ Magda would expound to Mummy, ‘she gets you on.’

And there it was. Magda was definitely on. What Mummy

didn't know was that Miss Drew liked Magda. They were the same sort. They both had quick tempers. Iris thought that must make a great understanding between them, a kind of sacred shrine wherein she could not enter, not having a temper herself.

Magda told her sister that Miss Drew hated snivelling kids who were obviously afraid of her.

'It's very trying for her having to teach you at all,' she explained, 'because you're no good at the piano, and she doesn't like you. It's *awful* for her!' she ended so passionately that Iris asked:

'Have you got a crush on her?'

Whereupon Magda went purple and her eyes started flashing, so Iris said quickly

'I didn't mean it.'

How could anyone have a pash for Miss Drew? Why, she wore corsets, and had a cross-looking pimple half-way down her hooked nose. Her eyes protruded fiercely, and even her hair fuzzed out angrily all over her head. So it was difficult to believe she had Innermost Feelings, as Magda said.

It was heart-breaking, hearing Magda practising Beethoven and Brahms, day after day. She learnt all the real music, whilst Iris was confined to beastly tinkly little tunes. She tried to get through them as quickly as possible, and then Miss Drew said tensely:

'You haven't touched that since last time. Do it again for Friday.'

'I'm just longing for when I'll play proper music, like you,' Iris said to Magda, who made a heavy throat noise like Tcha, Pshaw, and Humph, rolled into one, and retorted:

'Miss Drew won't ever let you. She can't bear to hear the classics badly played. She's got *Son'* you see.'

So it looked as if she were condemned to the tune-y tunes for ever, unless Miss Drew could be won over in some way. What could be done? The grapes might make her laugh. The grapes were those fat chords which often grew in clumps just over the page, and they said: 'Aha! Surprised you, eh?' No, she would

show Miss Drew her compositions, which nobody had ever seen. These were laboriously written down in a manuscript book, and were all about fairies. Mostly they consisted of chords with very close-together notes, which sounded more friendly than spread-out ones, and the last note of all – the legless white one – wore a top hat and a grin to show his importance.

Miss Drew looked at opus one, number one, in silence. Iris's hands were trembling more than ever before, and as the silence went on, her knees joined in as well. The joyous congratulatory smile never happened. Instead, Miss Drew handed back the book, and sarcastically pointed out the notes with tails the wrong way round. Iris could have explained about the notes not wanting all to face the same way, and other things of interest which the study of composition had taught her, but when she opened her mouth, only the tiniest pinpointed squeak shot out.

'You don't know the first thing about harmony or counter-point,' Miss Drew sneered, 'so, how you have the impertinence to show me this rubbish, is beyond me. And why in heaven's name are they all about fairies? You surely don't believe in fairies at your age, do you?'

Iris had to say yes, because if she said no, a million fairies would have immediately dropped dead.

'Well!' said Miss Drew disgustedly, 'you'd better keep it to yourself, or people will think you're mad.'

But Mummy believed in fairies too, and was proud of it. It could only mean there was a streak in the family. The manuscript book had to be destroyed at once, and the music which sang in her head squeezed out of existence. If you were part of a streak, it couldn't be helped, but it ought not to be encouraged.

The next lesson day, Iris sat in her form feeling more wretched than ever. It was useless trying to please Miss Drew. She had picked things up the second Miss Drew dropped them, only to be told scathingly:

'Get on with that study. You're glad of any excuse to stop, aren't you?'

She had asked Magda when Miss Drew's birthday was, plan-

ning to surprise her with a nice present, but it had just been. Weeks ago, she had given Miss Drew her autograph book, and she didn't dare to ask for it back. There was nothing she could do.

In ten minutes' time, she would gather up the books on her desk, put them slowly inside, drop her pencils in, one by one, and ask to be excused for her piano lesson. The answer would, unhappily, be yes. Watching those last hurrying minutes on her watch propped against a grammar, waves of pain started in the palms of her hands and jumped down into her stomach. There they made corkscrews, widening into spirals as the terrible ordeal approached.

On her way out of the classroom, she branched off to the lavatory, to dispose yet again of that mysterious penny. which when it came to the point – wasn't. She collected her music case, checking its contents several times, though there were only three, and set off down the long sinister corridor towards the green door at the far end. She knocked as humbly as possible, and waited for the other pupil to emerge. This hanging about was agony, and Miss Drew seemed to prolong it purposely. Shudders rushed up from Iris's toes, through her body, reaching the top of her head with a sickening pressure. Then they zig-zagged back to her feet again, and tingled her toenails.

'Come in!'

Iris tried not to see the blazing pimple and the hair fuzzing away furiously, as she settled herself on the piano stool, wiping clammy hands on her gym tunic. She began the scales in the usual cold, oppressive silence. The stumbling worsened, the fingers trembled more and more, but Miss Drew waited grimly until it was bad enough for her first outburst. It was the same with the arpeggios, then the study. Iris knew she would have to cry soon, and nothing sickened Miss Drew more. She decided to try and hang on until the tune tune.

Miss Drew said she would explain for the absolutely last time about the bottom half of time signatures. Immediately, Iris's mind jumped so stiffly to attention, out of fear of not understanding, that it heard only a monotonous babbling.

'Now do you see?' demanded Miss Drew.

'Yes,' whispered Iris.

'Then play this,' Miss Drew said cunningly, shoving up an example she had scribbled whilst speaking.

Two sliding doors in Iris's brain snapped tight shut, and no thoughts could squeeze in even edgeways.

'Hurry up, child!'

Iris forced her right hand over the keyboard, and there it stayed, suspended as if on a marionette string.

With a cry of exasperation, Miss Drew dived at the pink, shaking hand, intending to push it on to the starting note. There was a collision, an indignant clash of three piano keys, and for one dazed moment, both stared unbelievably at the jagged scratch on Iris's forefinger, placidly oozing blood.

At the same instant that Miss Drew started mumbling concerned mumbles, Iris burst into loud sobs. She groped around for her hanky, first in one knicker leg and then the other.

'I'll go and borrow one,' she heaved, and stumbled out.

Missing the usual explosive noise, she glanced over her shoulder and saw, to her astonishment, a pale Miss Drew, a wide-eyed and alarmed Miss Drew.

'She's having a stroke,' thought Iris, 'Magda will never forgive me.'

In the junior cloakroom, she held her hand under the cold tap, and watched the bright blood tailing off into watery pink. She couldn't face going back, and she had better not go into class, or they'd ask questions. She felt deeply sorry for the finger, wrapping it up and at once unwrapping it, to see how it was doing. She would jolly well tell everyone how she had been brutally attacked.

Whom should she begin with? Most of her friends, if told first, would pass it round at such a speed that every girl she drew aside after that would say carelessly: '*I know*,' and not be impressed at all.

The bell went. The juniors swarmed out into the playground, sweeping Iris along with them. Before she could find Mildred, who took ages to digest meanings, Magda was upon her.

'You little beast!' she snarled, eyes flashing, 'Miss Drew is in an awful state!'

'She dug her nail in my finger,' explained Iris, 'on purpose. It was painted, so I'm probably poisoned. Look.'

'She didn't! You aren't!' raged Magda wildly, hitting away the proffered hand, 'it was an accident. And now she's terribly upset, and thinks you'll tell Mummy.'

'Does she?'

Iris felt as though someone had tossed her thoughts up in the air and they had come down in quite a different pattern. Her sense of injury was swelling to luscious proportions

Magda looked round swiftly, and lowered her voice.

'You haven't told anyone about it, have you?'

'Well - no,' Iris confessed, with regret.

'Good,' sighed Magda, and her face subsided from scarlet to pink, 'because you mustn't tell anyone. *Not anyone*,' she repeated slowly. 'What do you suppose Rev Muv would say to Miss Drew if it reached her ears?'

' "Where's your Extra Munction *now*, dear Miss Drew?" ' Iris suggested.

Magda fairly danced with irritation.

'Extreme Unction, you idiot! And anyway, Miss Drew went straight to the chapel to confess it.'

'What penance will she get, do you think?' asked Iris, trying to sound disinterested.

Magda screwed her eyes up like a ball of waste paper, as she said vehemently:

'Not much, in fact hardly at all.'

'I should say it comes into the Sins of Passion,' continued Iris dreamily.

'It doesn't!' snapped Magda, and seizing her sister by the tie, she warned her again not to sneak to a soul, or you-know-what will happen.

Iris never had the least idea what You-know-what involved, and she was far too frightened to find out. But for once she felt it safe to say graciously:

'I'll think about it,' as she sauntered off to join an interesting-looking group with their heads together.

She lived the rest of the day in a dream. Twice already, Miss Drew had sought her out and enquired anxiously for the finger, and Iris had whispered bravely that it was Getting On, thank you. In the seniors, Magda was sure to be gnawing her nails in an agony of suspense. They'd both be having squiggles in their tummies now, perhaps even squigglier than Iris's extra worst.

When she reached home, Mummy would say:

'Iris *darling*, what have you done to your poor hand?'

It was heaven to imagine bursting into tears, and being largely comforted; Nanny being told; Daddy being consulted over coffee; news travelling to the kitchen; everyone questioning her closely, and glancing at each other meaningly; while in the Convent, Rev Muv would be holding an emergency meeting of all the nuns, to decide about Miss Drew's state of grace . . . the prefects making a collection to light millions of candles . . . and special masses . . . intercessions . . . things called Indulgences, which sounded so nice and cosy . . . Miss Drew crying, and coming to Iris for a hanky . . . Iris being saintly and forgiving . . .

But of course, it couldn't really happen. Magda would see to that.

Iris inspected the finger again. It was healing, much too quickly. Her happy little day was sliding away from her. What a pity she had to step out of it into tomorrow.

The Writer of the Family

As soon as Iris saw 'Spiona' running in the third race, she knew without looking that its mother must be called Fiona. And it was. Fiona! The chief character in the book she had written! It was so exciting that she wanted to tell Granny, who was guarding the soap box and eating an ice-cream meditatively. Granny got all her winners by rummaging through her dreams. But Magda might overhear and say something sarky. It would have to be a special secret between Iris and Fiona.

A good thing, perhaps. It might strengthen their friendship. Fiona, who had grown more and more solid as the book progressed, and had eventually jumped clean out of Chapter Six, was beginning to wander away now the book was finished. She came and went like a will-o'-the-wisp. It was lonely without her.

She was everything Iris was not, and yet she wanted to be friends. She was slim and pretty, not fat and pasty like Iris. Her hair was a mass of gleaming dancing curls, not scraped back into ropy pigtails with fizzly ends. She was marvellous at games, and climbed trees like a boy. She was full of wild ideas and naughty plans, which Iris was too timid to follow up. And the way she cheeked the nuns at Iris's Convent school! She was Brave.

Magda could be awfully rude and slam doors, but she thought Iris a soppy little idiot. It had not mattered so much since Fiona came, but there was the haunting fear that one day even *she* would turn away in contempt. The dolls would never be quite the same again. They had failed to come alive however strong the spells you chanted over them. Even when you laid on them and breathed into their noses, like in the Bible story, they just stared piteously with parted lips. But Fiona had come alive without any trying.

Iris wondered why she had not tried a book before. It had made life so enchanted. You woke up every morning feeling so ready. Short stories were all right, but they flashed past like express

trains, and the characters inside were all smeared together. As for poems, they were just the puffs from the engine, there one minute, dissolved the next.

When Iris squeezed her way back through the crowds, having slipped off to place her private bet, Magda was in a fine old stew. She shoved her sister sideways, and dealt her a couple of punches. Then she rammed her school hat farther on her head, which was a bad sign.

‘Where’ve you been?’ she snapped.

‘Just backing my horse.’

‘So was I. Why didn’t you stick to me, like Mummy said?’

Fiona said cheekily:

‘Mind your own biz!’

But Iris circled an ankle in mid-air and pursed her lips like a pie frill.

‘Which horse?’ demanded Magda.

‘I almost forget,’ said Iris, studying her foot as if it had suddenly sprouted out of her leg.

‘Oh no, you don’t!’ Magda hissed grimly.

Fiona said:

‘Shud up, you bully!’

And Iris squeaked quickly:

‘It was Spiona.’

‘What?’ snorted Magda, ‘are you potty? Spiona’s the favourite. You know perfectly well it’s no use backing them. You don’t get enough.’

‘It’s going to win,’ ventured Iris, while Fiona tagged on:

‘So boo to you!’ and made a hideous face.

‘Oh.’

Magda became affable all at once.

‘How much did you put on?’

‘Two shillings to win.’

‘What?’ bawled Magda, and uttered a succession of meaningful throat noises.

‘Are you off your nut? You can’t do that! It’s gambling. A shilling’s all right, or even one each way, but two to win . . . I’

She paused, and scrutinized her sister as if she was a startling headline.

'You see,' Iris explained, 'it's Spiona, out of Fiona. Look, it says so.'

'I don't care *who* it's out of!' Magda stormed.

'But Fiona,' stressed Iris, 'the heroine of my book.'

'Oh, you're loopy! You're as bad as Granny with her dreams. Tell you what,' she said, becoming gracious again, 'I'll go halves with you. Here you are.'

'Quite all right, thanks,' Iris said politely, and moved off.

'You've *got* to take it.'

Magda gripped Iris's hand, stuffed a shilling in it, and gave the arm a few pinches for good measure.

'Otherwise,' she said generously, 'there'd be an awful wax if Mummy and Gran found out what you did.'

Spiona romped home. But it was only a small bulge of excitement. Iris halved her winnings with Magda, who maintained her attitude of benevolence, accepting it under sufferance, as it were.

Granny took them home then. She was feeling put out, because she'd seen a fortune in the tea leaves yesterday, but it could only have been a shilling after all, because Bob's Your Uncle won instead of Mint.

'It might have meant the parsley sort of mint,' Iris suggested, and Granny said yes perhaps so, but never mind, she'd picked up on Jilted, because of poor dear Molly and that rotter Paul, but she'd said all along there was something shady about the man and his outrageous ties.

Mummy was at the door to meet them.

'Well?' she asked eagerly.

Granny said:

'Well, dear, you know that extraordinary dream I told you about . . .'

Magda said:

'I went entirely on horseflesh, and would you believe it, there was a mare with fallen fetlocks . . .'

Iris said:

'I won on Spiona. I won on Spiona,' and went on repeating it like the chugs in a Strauss waltz, while the other two wove their tunes on top. They closed into a cadence at last, and Mummy's staccato exclamations were replaced by marvelling hums behind pressed lips. Then she heard Iris chugging solidly:

'I won on Spiona.'

'Did you, darling? What a funny name to choose.'

'Out of Fiona,' pursued Iris, 'out of my book.'

'Oh, of course! It was bound to win!'

Iris sighed with heavy satisfaction.

'So did I win on Spiona,' cut in Magda fiercely, and made a so-snubs-to-you face at her sister.

'That's splendid, darling,' Mummy said, and the words seemed to bounce out of her mouth much bouncier than when Iris had told her.

But she followed Iris into the nursery and sat down wearing her surprise-for-you smile.

'I think it's a good omen, about that horse Fiona,' she began.

'Spiona, Mummy,' Iris corrected.

'Yes, Spiona. You see, Granny and I have been thinking. You know that horse book I gave Magda, the one written by a little girl?'

'Yes,' Iris sighed. It was such a well-written book it had made her feel small and no-goodish.

'She must have been helped,' Mummy added quickly.

'Do you think so?' Iris murmured hopefully.

'Of course. And Granny said: if *she* can publish her books, why not you?'

'Because I don't know any long words,' Iris said gloomily.

'Oh no, that doesn't matter at all,' smiled Mummy, and her face showed that the surprise was frothing up like boiling milk.

'Granny says she'll pay for your book to be typed, and then we'll send it to a publisher. It'll be your own unaided work. We'll send it just as you wrote it.'

She leaned back triumphantly.

'Oh, Mummy!' But just as Iris's excitement was stretching up to its full height, she caught hold of it and pressed it back like a jack-in-the-box.

'I don't think I'm nearly good enough, Mummy. Some of the chapters are awfully silly. They're only funny to me and Fiona.'

'Oh, nonsense, darling!'

'Yes, they are,' Iris hurried on while her courage still held good.

'They're . . . well, they're sort of . . . you see, it's a kind of secret showing-off.'

There! It was out! She blushed with embarrassment, and jerked her leg backwards and forwards from the knee.

'Don't be a silly-billy!' laughed Mummy, 'you're always too modest about your stories. You wait and see. Your book is just as good as that horse one.'

While they were talking, Daddy had been calling. Low growls had smudged their conversation.

'Black Nob! Where are you? Black! Which room are you in?'

And each hesitant step he took squeezed out a protesting squeak from his shoes.

'Coming!' sang out Mummy, and the growls suddenly fused into one thick grunt of relief.

As soon as the door closed, Iris turned six somersaults, stood on her head magnificently, and executed a perfect pirouette. Or rather – Fiona did them all for her.

'Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it exactl. like a fairy story? And you'll be famous too, Fiona.'

'I shall like that.'

'But just think!' Iris's thoughts were coming all shivery and like tinsel, 'our book in print! My name on the cover! Iris Stewart. It's a pity one's own name sounds so silly. Oh, but it's like living a real fairy story. Oh blimey, I do feel sick!'

She flopped down and rubbed her tummy, vigorously at first, but as her dreams spiralled wider and wider, the circular rubs got slower and slower, like a roundabout running down. Goodness! If such magical things as this could happen, someone might

even release her from the spell, and she'd change from Iris into Fiona. She felt different already. Perhaps she would gradually change, bit by bit. Perhaps at this very moment, her finger-nails were Fiona's and the rest of her stayed Iris.

The sunlight flecking the nursery table in rainbow strips and silver pools, winked merrily at her, as if it knew. The flowers in the rockery nodded to each other confidentially, and a bumble bee sped off to spread the exciting news. Soon it would be the talk of Fairyland.

Everything ordinary was melting into a strange, lacy magic. But when she joined the family for supper, things were going on just the same as usual. Granny was saying:

'Not too much, dear. Remember my flatulence.'

And Mummy was groaning softly:

'Oh, *help!*'

Then Granny said:

'No potatoes for me, dear. Remember my waistline.'

And Mummy slammed down a dish lid in exasperation. Daddy said nothing, but he shuffled his feet irritably, and his thoughts were very loud.

Granny glared at her plateful as if daring it to turn into indigestion. Then she gave a little annoyed choke, and said bitterly that she'd take some bicarb afterwards. After a preliminary 'umming' to reserve the space for her next remark, she said:

'There's a horse called Nightmare running in the 3.30 tomorrow. It's very highly thought of. I was wondering . . .'

Mummy laughed shortly and said:

'Why not skip the bicarb and make sure of one?'

At which Granny hitched her glasses and withdrew herself, like a snail, into offended silence. Daddy and Mummy threw each other eyefuls of words back and forth like a tennis ball. Magda stared round the table angrily, and Iris released the sentence which had been waiting patiently at the back of her throat.

'Mummy, will they let me choose which page smell I like best? I've decided the one I want.'

The faces shut blankly. They opened a crack, and a little sur-

prise peeped out; wider, and bewilderment spread over, wider still, and vague indulgent expressions took charge of the whole surface.

They had forgotten already!

If only Iris knew the magic word to pronounce, then they would all become as bewitched as herself.

She was glad when bedtime came, and she was alone with Fiona. They stood by the bookshelf, looking with awe at the bundle of uneven pages torn out of exercise books. Soon they would turn into neat typewritten sheets, and then into a real book. It was such an overwhelmingly big magic.

Iris put the manuscript under her pillow, so that she could go to sleep touching it with her finger-tips. Tomorrow, she planned, climbing into bed and taking deep comforting sniffs of her old teddy, she would tell Guinevere Marshall, if the words didn't get stuck to the roof of her mouth.

The Marshall cousins lived in London, and were frightfully independent and clever. Mummy said they had only asked Iris on her own tomorrow to see whether she'd ever arrive. So like them, she had added resentfully. Mummy disliked the Marshall cousins, because their mother boosted them as sensational prodigies. Mummy said it was only to impress the rest of the family. The Marshalls gave themselves airs just because they had lived abroad until a couple of months ago. Iris sometimes wondered if Mummy felt that way because her own children were so dull, and the Marshalls, who didn't fit into any recognized pattern, showed them up. Until they came, Mummy had been able to make something of her children, but now the uncles and aunts could talk of nothing but those extraordinary Marshalls.

Not having travelled alone before, Iris was stuffed with instructions what to do in every conceivable kind of emergency and predicament. Mummy drew little maps with marks and crosses on them. Then Daddy secretly told her a much better route. Granny advised her to stick to buses and avoid undergrounds altogether, because you never knew with those moving staircases, and poor dear Nellie had told her of a dreadful accident . . .

‘Do remember,’ called out Mummy from the landing window, as Iris was setting out, ‘don’t speak to any strange men. If they say anything, don’t answer. Have a nice time, darling, and give Aunt Freda my message . . .’

It seemed very complicated, this travelling business, but Fiona was coming too, and she had been going about on her own for years. Iris shifted up in the carriage to let Fiona have her turn in the corner seat. There were only four others, and three of them got out at the first station up the line. That left the man opposite. Iris paused in her conversation with Fiona to size up the man and decide if he were strange or hot.

He was staring fixedly at her, smiling stiffly like a dummy. In fact, with his stiff hair, rigid neck, and unblinking eyes, he might very well have been part of a ventriloquist’s act.

There could be no doubt. He *was* a strange man. Iris tried to concentrate on the rows of grubby houses and clothes-lines moving along outside, but the fixed stare kept pulling her eyes round. What would he do? Was he mad? Would he chloroform her? Or kill her straight away?

The nasal clacketing of the train rose to a hysterical babbling. A cry of anguish shuddered through it. It groaned, and drew itself up painfully.

As Iris sprang at the door, the strange man leaned forward. His mouth fell open. He was going to say something. She struggled with the handle. It wouldn’t turn.

‘May I?’

And he opened it, quite easily.

Iris jumped out, pressing her lips tightly to shut in the thank you. When she glanced back, one hand on the next carriage door, the strange man was still watching her through the window. The hideous leer looked almost an ordinary smile.

Fiona, squashed uncomfortable by a fat woman, said crossly:

‘We might have had a thrilling adventure, if you hadn’t been scared. Baby!’

Iris felt muddled and silly. Never mind, she’d make up for it by doing everything else specially well. In fact, she’d go Daddy’s

way, without any little maps. And anyway, Fiona would be awfully proud of her when she told the Marshalls about their book.

She got out at the junction, and watched the train sliding away into the distance. It was a peculiar feeling, as if half of her was still on it, going by Mummy's route. She read the two halves of her ticket through several times before relinquishing one to the collector. She walked down noisy steps, through a long echoing tunnel which shouted angry contradictions at everyone's footfalls. There were similar flights of steps going up at intervals each side. At least, they all *looked* the same, but you never knew for sure. Everyone she passed beckoned invitingly, mysteriously. But at the top stood a guarding dragon, taking vicious little bites out of all who attempted to pass him.

The light-filled mouth at the far end widened into a monstrous yawn as Iris approached it. Beyond its swallow was safety, but you had to make a dash for it in case it snapped shut.

'Turn to the right,' Daddy had said, swinging out his arm sideways (he never lost an opportunity for exercising his body), 'then bear left -' with a violent twist of his torso - (what fun if there really was a bear left, strolling moodily up and down the pavement, a landmark for travellers), 'and you'll see the request stop. Can't miss it,' and he shrugged the whole business off himself with a muscular heave of his shoulders.

Iris was the only one at the stop. She raised her arm at the oncoming bus, and it dashed past haughtily. The bonnets of the buses behind gaped at her in amazement and hurried on. Her arm ached trying to stop one. She thought bitterly.

'It's because I'm not grown-up. They don't care. I don't count.'

She would never get to the Marshalls. She'd have to go home and say she couldn't stop a bus, and Daddy would say 'Bosh!' and Mummy would look puzzled, and Granny would say 'Well, dear, only the other day that poor Mrs Smith was telling me a most terrible thing . . .'

But just as the tears were pushing themselves out relentlessly, and just when Fiona was about to chant: 'Cowardy, cowardy

custard!’ two grown-ups joined her. The man held out a nonchalant arm, and the next bus hastened to draw up, with an obsequious expression on its smug bonnet.

Fiona laughed. Iris said there was no proof that it hadn’t stopped for *her* arm, but she knew it hadn’t.

The Marshalls lived in one of those flats in which a lot of shoe box rooms crowd on to a central passage, as if they’d like to get together and make one nice big room.

Isolde, who was nine and the youngest, had been posted at the window as lookout. By the time Iris had climbed the two flights of stairs, the flat door was open, but nobody was waiting inside. Guinevere, genius of the ’cello, was thrashing the instrument with raucous abandon. Isolde, muse of painting, had seized her drawing-board and pulled her long hair over her face. Damon, child actor, was strutting about stiffly, reciting Shakespeare, and the eldest, Claude, was flipping over the pages of a massive volume of philosophy as though it were a detective novel.

Iris hovered, coughing and tapping on the door. The practising and reciting intensified. So she went in, because Fiona dared her. The Marshalls did not appear to see her at once. Then one of them glanced up sou’fully, recognized Iris gradually, piece by piece, and jumped up in astonishment.

‘You should have knocked, old thing!’ shouted Guinevere, untwiddling her bow with elaborate flourishes.

‘I did,’ Iris said apologetically.

‘Oh God, aren’t we the limit? We get so absorbed in our art that the material world ceases to exist.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Iris, unfolding a smile cautiously. You have to be careful where you smile, with clever people.

‘So you got here all right,’ boomed Isolde in her deep voice.

‘That, my dear Isolde,’ pronounced Claude patronizingly, ‘is an obvious conclusion. If the child is here, it follows, by a simple process of logic, that she got here.’

‘But,’ cried Damon, with a series of epileptic gestures, ‘how do we know she is here? You said before lunch that none of us really exist at all!’

'Ah,' said the girls profoundly, and Iris tacked on an Ah of her own too, and then wished she hadn't, for Claude swung his superior stare on to her like a blinding searchlight.

'What exactly do you mean by that "Ah", Iris?' he demanded, looming up from the bowels of an armchair.

'Just . . . "Ah",' Iris faltered, looking round at the others for support. But they had swopped sides and were massing against her like any army.

'My dear child,' sighed Claude in his crusty voice, 'you can't just say "Ah", and not mean anything. Trace your thought process back to where it began, and once you've found its source, you can then trace it on to its ultimate conclusion, and then we shall know what profundity is sealed up in that little word "Ah".'

The others sniggered joyously, but when Iris tried to join in, their faces slammed and shut her out.

'Where is Aunt Freda?' she asked indifferently.

'Do you want to see her?' enquired Damon, working his eyebrows furiously.

'Yes, please.'

'Why?'

Iris's worried silence was acclaimed by yells of mirth from the younger ones. Claude sank further into himself and crossed his legs, twining them round each other tightly.

'It's nothing to laugh at,' he reproved, 'it's very tragic. The child's upbringing had rendered her totally repressed.'

'Oh lord, yes!' boomed Isolde, like a bassoon. She blinked earnestly through her fringe:

'She's got repressions!'

'Isolde, what do you mean by the word "repression"? Let us have your definition, before we proceed further.'

Aunt Freda came in then. She was short, thin-lipped, with black snappy eyes. Her voice was like steel.

'Hullo, Iris,' she said, stretching a smile as if her lips needed exercise, 'why have you still got on your coat?'

'She's waiting for us to invite her politely to remove it!'

shrilled Damon, nearly stunning himself with a dramatic clasp of his forehead.

'She'll have to wait a long time, then,' his mother said, and she laughed like the clacketing train. The children screeched appreciatively.

Iris began to think that perhaps she wouldn't tell the Marshalls about her book, after all. Another time. When Mummy was there.

'Everyone has to earn their tea in this house,' announced Aunt Freda, 'so I shall organize competitions.'

A corkscrew pain zigzagged through Iris. What *sort* of competitions? Ones on paper were bearable, but suppose they were physical feats. After all, she was fat. The Marshalls were slight and springy. They even walked with bouncy, self-assured steps.

'Guinevere will start.'

Guinevere leapt up, tossed back her pigtails, and placing a chair in the middle of the floor, worked her rubbery self round it without touching the ground.

'Now you, Iris.'

Iris walked slowly towards the chair, which seemed to smirk at her as derisively as the children. She had to try, to show she was a sport. But you can't, if you're fat and clumsy.

She scrambled up from the floor, grinning foolishly. The Marshalls catapulted silent looks at each other. Then Damon was called upon to illustrate a balancing feat. . . . Then Isolde. . . . Then Claude. . . . They were so marvellous at everything. Fiona was admiring them tremendously.

They decided, after a long discussion in German, to let Iris have some tea in spite of her hopeless performances, because otherwise she'd sneak to the family.

'And then they'll say we're absolute barbarians,' chuckled Aunt Freda.

'I expect they do already!' hooted Isolde.

Everyone talked with their mouth full at tea time, and everyone had deep and important things to say. Whenever Iris was goaded into giving an opinion, her blushes and stammers set up a buzz

of whispered German, and sometimes the girls sent Morse signals to each other with their eyelids. Aunt Freda urged them on as if she were riding them all simultaneously in the Grand National, and her spiteful little eyes darted at this one and that with greedy pride.

Back in the sitting-room, she said to Iris:

'They tell me that you write.'

An expectant hush fell on the others.

'Oh no, not really,' Iris assured her, remembering with sudden shame the poems she had dedicated to each of the Marshalls on their arrival in England, as a gesture of friendliness.

Claude, telescoped inside an armchair, plaited his puny legs and said severely:

'What do you mean by "No not really"? Either you write, or you don't write. And since every relation in this incredible family possesses one of your fairy poems, it follows that you do write.'

'I write poetry too,' Aunt Freda, and she threw a sly glance at Guinevere who bowed it to Damon who thrust it at Isolde who handed it reverently to Claude, who psycho-analysed it.

'Would you like to see my poetry?'

'Oh yes, please, if you wouldn't mind.' Fancy Aunt Freda offering to show her her poetry!

'If Mother had minded,' began Claude crustily, but Aunt Freda cut in:

'On the contrary, I should value your opinion on them.'

Guinevere choked, and the others began whispering rapidly in exaggerated French.

Iris was seated on the sofa with a bundle of beautifully typed manuscripts on her knee. As she read, she felt the five pairs of eyes burning holes in her. Wisps of titters, shafts of giggles, striped the expectant silence.

She stumbled on to the end of the first poem. The words had swirled detachedly round her mind, refusing to link up and make sentences. Passion came in a lot, and there were pulsating bodies in every other verse.

'What do you think of it?' asked Aunt Freda directly Iris raised her eyes reluctantly from the page. After all, she couldn't avert them for ever.

'Oh, I think it's beautiful!' she breathed nervously.

Knowing looks were handed round again like a plate of sandwiches.

'It isn't meant to convey beauty,' said Aunt Freda acidly.

'What *is* it about?' demanded Claude, tapping his finger-tips lightly together.

'Love?'

'Anything *but*!' shrieked Guinevere, and the younger ones rolled on the floor in hysterics.

'Read the next one,' gasped Damon.

Iris knew she couldn't go through that watchful silence again. It had sucked her dry like a vampire, so she said that she wasn't clever enough to criticize Aunt Freda's poetry.

'I should think not, indeed!' snapped her aunt, and Isolde growled:

'Mother writes *real* poetry. You shouldn't be able to understand *real* poetry.'

Guinevere added nastily:

'You surely don't imagine *you*'ll ever write like that, do you? And the fuss the family make of you!'

They chanted in unison:

'The Writer of the Family! Ha! Ha!'

Iris tried to laugh too, but waves of black shame were sweeping through her like those dark billows which roll across the purple in front of closed sleepy eyes.

How presumptuous she had been! How idiotic she was, beside these brainy cousins! No wonder they laughed at her. And Fiona . . . ?

It was time to go, at last. The Marshalls crowded round Iris, staring at her trembling, fumbling fingers dragging on her coat and gloves.

'Well,' she said helplessly, 'thank you very much for having me, Aunt Freda.'

'Oh heavens, not *that!*' her aunt cried disgustedly, and shut the door abruptly.

There was a hiss of lowered voices as Iris went down the stairs, and then peals of laughter slashed the air. They followed her down the street, in relays, crunching into her until she felt she was being put through a mincer.

She sat hunched up in the train, hiding herself from Fiona's contemptuous gaze. It was true, what Claude said about not existing. Why, she was nothing! She had never felt so thoroughly nothing before. The Marshalls had thought her up for the afternoon, that was all. They'd thought a stupid no-good fat school-girl. When she got home, Mummy would think her up. . . . The Writer of the Family. She'd be saying cosily to Granny:

'Wait till Iris's book is published. That'll show those conceited Marshalls!'

Poor Mummy! Poor Granny! What a terrible humiliation it would be. Another triumph for Aunt Freda, who wrote real poetry so full of sense that it read like nonsense to idiots like Iris.

What could she do to save the family such a disgrace?

Burn it.

Yes! Take it downstairs in the middle of the night, and push it – chapter by rotten chapter – into the kitchen fire. No – better still, put it on the bonfire at the bottom of the garden. The flames would reach out greedily, licking considerably at first, then crackling mercilessly like Aunt Freda's laugh.

She ran home from the station, and dashed straight up to her room. Hot and panting, she whipped away the pillow.

They had got it! She was too late. She turned impulsively to Fiona, and then knew that was useless. She was a nothing. Fiona was fed up with her at last.

The silence pressed heavily all round her. She was quite alone now.

Downstairs, Granny was rustling newspapers and droning into the telephone:

'And for the 2.30, a shilling each way on Tomboy. . . .'

Magda was practising the piano. The minor scales made sad little hills . . . up . . . down . . . up . . . down . . .

There were thuds from the drawing-room, shaking the floors. Daddy was jumping over chairs to keep fit.

But the silence was thicker than all the sounds.

Mummy's comfy voice flowed up the stairs in a warm stream:

'Did you have a nice time, darling?'

'Oh yes, Mummy! I had a lovely time, thank you.'

The Avenging of Sister Thérèse

'Parlez Français!' said Sister Thérèse, for the hundredth time. She had lowered her glasses to stare appealingly round the class through pale, pink-rimmed eyes. Now she pushed the specs up on her smooth ample forehead which disappeared into her starched bonnet. She was a ramshackle sort of nun, Sister Thérèse, with spots on her bib and hair tumbling down at the back, escaping in wanton wisps below her cap. She bent over the grubby piece of sewing brought up for inspection.

'Too beeg! Too beeg the stitches!' she sighed, and then came the sickening sound of thread being snapped and drawn relentlessly out.

'Oh, Sister!' protested Iris. It had taken her ages to do that seam.

'Too beeg the stitches! Too beeg the stitches!' chanted the class.

'Machine stitch,' Sister Thérèse stressed in her bad English.

'Mashing stitch, Sister?' mimicked Monica Carstairs.

'What you want is invisible menders, Sister!' shrilled Nora Price, squinting at a needle and driving at it a soggy end of cotton.

'But I could hardly see them at all,' Iris grumbled. She slouched back to her desk.

'Parlez Frorsay!' yelled the class.

'Sister's jest as bad,' drawled Pamela in her assumed American, 'aren't you jest as forgetful as we are, Sister Fraise? There you go, tarking English to Iris without knowing it!'

The two Chidley sisters rolled against each other, giggling helplessly, Monica held up the ultra-modest knickers she was making, her bright face shining over the top.

'If these don't fit me,' she chuckled, 'I'm going to give them to you, Sister Fraise!'

The class gave a roar of delight. Shrill screams, deep cackles, hoarse whinnies, shot like vivid colour through the mass of sound. The delicious thought of Sister Fraise in navy-blue knickers! She

waddled up and down in their minds; navy-blue knicks and a starched bonnet framing her smooth puffy face with purity.

'I wonder', Monica whispered to Iris, 'what they really wear underneath all those petticoats?'

'Oh, it couldn't be ordinary things, could it? I mean, you can't 'imagine . . .'

No, you can't, can you? Cecilia says they have to wear bathing costumes in the bath.'

That was a blow. The nuns, whose voluminous clothes successfully hid even a hint of human shape, and who gave lectures on how to undress without seeing yourself, could yet be furtively disrobed in the imagination. One just couldn't resist picturing Reverend Mother's great bulk wedged in the bath, though the thought made one blush.

Nora Price lifted her humorous face from the exercise book on her knee. It was full of drawings of corseted ladies. She did them at every opportunity.

'Bet they don't wear stays,' she murmured.

'Of course not!'

Monica went a little pink. It was almost a blasphemous suggestion, and hardly confessable to the handsome Father Murray. One would have to lump it in with a varied assortment of sins.

'Connie does.'

Connie was Miss Drew, the piano mistress.

'My sister,' Iris began importantly, because Magda was a Senior and admired for her gusto. 'My sister has a saying. She can make me giggle at the most awfully solemn moments, simply by hissing: "Triple C. D.!"'

'What's it mean?'

The other two paused in their lavish licking of cotton ends.

'Connie's Corsets Came Down.'

Monica and Nora shrieked their approval. Sister Thérèse raised her patient face, and bleated:

'Parlez Français, s'il vous plait!'

Iris wriggled uncomfortably. She never enjoyed involving Sister Traise, somehow.

'Parlez Frorsay!' echoed the cheeky ones joyously. To them, it was such fun ragging Sister Traise. She just asked for it, every time. The minute you'd set eyes on her, you had known she couldn't keep order. The very sight of her helpless worried face kindled a mass cruelty in the class.

Iris, always overshadowed by Magda's gusto, could not help trembling with excitement at the success of Triple C.D., which was now being passed from girl to girl, and receiving roars of appreciation at each desk. As soon as it subsided to a flat murmuring again, she said carelessly:

'We have another of those.'

'What is it?' demanded Monica, leering horribly at the eye of her needle which was filled up with dirt from her nails.

'The Four B's,' Iris announced, and waited to be asked again.

'It means: Bumptious Behinds Burst Big Bloomers.'

That one did not go down quite so well, and Iris cursed herself for not timing it to round off Monica's offer of the knickers. Well, it couldn't be helped, and it had been fun, while it lasted. The only thing was, Triple C. D. and the Four B's constituted her only intimacy with Magda, and had been preserved as a secret. They could whisper them in front of other girls who'd look mystified – or better still, curious. Now they would be all over the school in no time . .

'I know one,' Margaret Chidley was saying.

'Go on, then!' she was urged.

'Oh, I can't!' Margaret tittered.

'Oh, be a sport!'

'Dare you to!'

Margaret took a deep breath, looked Sister Thérèse full in the face, and said distinctly:

'Zut!'

A hush fell on the class. French swear words had long been sought, for use on Sister Traise, but when it actually came to the point – well, it made one a little hot inside. But Sister Thérèse let her hands fall wearily and limply on to the desk, and gazed with glassy appeal at the culprit. Emboldened by this tame

reception, Jennifer Chidley said severely to her sister:

'Fermez votre bouche!'

'Eet is enough!' bleated Sister, but her smooth round face could only register resignation and anxiety, try as she might.

'But we were parleeing Frorsay, Sister!' hooted Monica, and the cry was triumphantly taken up on all sides.

At that moment, in walked Sister Edith. To come upon Sister Edith, the head nun, even casually in the corridor, was to experience a shock to one's whole system. Her every appearance was like an awesome supernatural manifestation. She was the only nun nobody dreamed of picturing in her bath. She would have known.

The class stood up, their limbs and senses stiff with apprehension. Iris, who had nightmares about Sister Edith, had to hold herself steady with one hand on her desk.

'What,' said Sister Edith, pronouncing the 'h' in a draughty way that sent shudders through everybody, 'is the meaning of this ungodly uproar?'

'Eet is nothing,' Sister Thérèse said, standing anxiously by her desk, 'we haff leetle joke.'

Sister Edith bent her terrible gaze on the junior nun. One could almost see the words freezing on Sister Thérèse's lips. It needed no further words to subdue the class, though it was steeling itself for the tongue which was like a lash. Sister Edith looked from girl to girl, starting on the front line of desks and working slowly to the back. It was as though she swept them with a poisonous ray. The impact of those cold, emotionless eyes! But you had to meet them. There was no escaping them.

The door closed behind Sister Edith, and the class sat down with elaborate, painfully silent movements. Nobody spoke. Nobody looked at anyone else. There was something so degrading about this abject reaction to Sister Edith.

Iris ran out of thread first. At least, some of the others had, but they were industriously winding their empty needles in and out of the material. Iris raised her eyes cautiously, keeping her head bowed. She saw Sister Thérèse gazing at her with such worried

tenderness in her tired pale eyes that she felt tears tingle her own. For it had been so much worse for Sister Traise. And, astonishingly enough – she was just realizing it – Sister Traise always did get the worst of everything from everyone. Why, the poor little thing was not even allowed her full lesson time! She would creep in, smiling her plain smile over the large cardboard box clasped in her arms, and the nun at the desk would whip out her watch and say tartly: ‘Five minutes more, Sister dear.’ ‘Oh, I think . . .’ Sister Traise would murmur, but one raised eyebrow from her superior and away she scuttled, beaming and bowing for all the world like a chubby Buddha.

Oh, the agony of shame torturing Iris’s mind! The shock of Sister Edith, cutting her off completely from the rest of the class, had made a space in her mind. The uneasy thought circling its border for so long, had found a way in. They were beastly to Sister Traise. She was an angel. She was bullied and badgered by nuns and girls alike. And yet, she could feel such concern for Iris, one of her tormentors.

The door opened again. Sister Françoise’s sharp, cunning features in their long narrow face, insinuated themselves ferret-like into the room. Her watch was ready in her hand. Sister Thérèse smiled her placid shiny smile, but her fingers were already groping for reels and scissors to pop in the box.

‘Ah, ma Sœur! But there remains five minutes!’

‘Non, non, non!’ glinted Sister Françoise, advancing her spare and nervy body.

Sister Thérèse produced her watch from a subtle pocket somewhere. There followed a conversation in French, during which the class quietly rolled up their needlework and half-opened their desks. Sister Françoise’s voice, sly and oily . . . then Sister Thérèse, meek and protesting . . . Sister Françoise, digging her words in . . . Sister Thérèse, fluttering hers like frail petals. . . .

The class, standing ready for the prayer said before each lesson, watched Sister Françoise, who had a shocking temper under all that oiliness, seize Sister Thérèse by the arm and pull her over to the door. And as Iris looked, they seemed to turn into

herself and Magda. . . . Still bleating helplessly, the little nun was bundled outside. 'Snubbed! Sat on!' Iris thought angrily.

Sister Françoise turned her angular person to the girls, twitching her long nose, funnelling her mouth forward and drawing it back. She put her watch back five minutes, and hunched her bony shoulders expressively, inviting the class to share her triumph. They responded willingly, and Iris afraid of being different, tittered as well. But she caught Sister's crafty eye, and looked hatred at her. Surprised at her courage, she planned then and there how to take Sister Traise's revenge for her. Sister Françoise had three very feeble jokes which she plugged at every French lesson, and everyone laughed obediently. It was good policy, anyway. If Sister took a dislike to a girl – which she did very easily – it was her custom to make a fool of the victim and incite the class to join her. Those who laughed loudest at her powdery little stories did well in the next French test. But Iris was jolly well going to keep a completely straight face from now on.

Sister Françoise whisked round to face the crucifix, drew her lips taut like a piece of string, and crossed herself with a very small cross. So like her character, thought Iris. It was fascinating to watch Sister Traise's large flowing movements with boneless wrists. As for Sister Edith . . . But you couldn't describe those icy gestures. . . .

Sister Françoise raised pious eyes and said rapidly:

'En-nom-du-Père-et-du-Fils-et-du-Sainte-Esprit—'

'Assy swotty,' mumbled the class, but Sister, impatient to the end, was already half-way through the next bit.

The exercise books were handed back, with twitchy smiles to a favoured few, derisive comments to the rest. Iris's mind leaned forward expectantly. They chanted through some verbs. Iris's mind stood on tiptoe. Margaret, who had the best accent, started reading:

'Monsieur Corbeau sur un arbre perche. . . .'

The strain was terrible. Iris's heart was pounding under her gym tunic. Unless it happened soon, she'd never dare . . .

Sister Françoise gave her hollow laugh, looked roguishly

round the class with sharp jerks of her head, and said:

'Écoutez, mes enfants, J'étais - ' but she lapsed into English to be quite sure everyone appreciated her wit. 'I was in a train, you see, and opposite there was a lady, you know, and she had painted her top lip - so - but not the bottom one. She had forgotten it. You see, it was so funny!'

The class obliged. Sister Françoise pecked up their separate contributions as a hen does grain, jerking her bonnet from girl to girl - and in the midst of the toothful faces sat Iris, immobile, with an expression of stone, and rather the same colour. The greedy pleasure on Sister's face vanished as though it had been whipped off. Incredulously, she looked again, and Iris met her eye, dying a thousand deaths the while. In dazed confusion, Sister Françoise slapped some books straight, stared bleakly round the room, and then wandered over to the blackboard. She did not so much as glance at Iris for the rest of the lesson.

In her wildest dreams, Iris, whose eyes had followed Sister's every movement like a cat stalking a mouse, had never hoped for such success. But when the bell rang and they filed meekly out into the courtyard for break, her exultation gave place to a bolt-upright fear of the consequences. Twenty Hail Maries and a handful of Our Fathers, and Sister Françoise would be fortified anew. She was probably in the chapel at this very moment, gathering new strength. Things looked black indeed. You only had to say to a girl in another class: 'I'm in Sister Fanny's bad books this term,' and you'd get as much scared sympathy as though you had been sentenced to a concentration camp. But still, poor Sister Thérèse. . . . All the nuns picked on her . . . pushed her around . . . she only taught *sewing* . . .

Iris sipped the boiled milk which was so watered it tasted of nothing - not even water. Across the far end of the courtyard, a lay-nun was pushing Reverend Mother's bath chair. As soon as a girl noticed it, she hastily dropped a curtsy. All over the playground, girls were bobbing expertly up and down, still chattering, laughing, and munching biscuits. They had to curtsy whenever a teaching nun was sighted (the serving ones didn't count) even if

her back was turned, or she was miles off. Of course, nobody bothered for Sister Traise's back, but you daren't risk missing out for anyone else. They seemed to sense it. Sister Edith had been known to turn slowly round and fix a slacker with eyes that lit up the very threadbare condition of her soul.

'My sister,' began Iris, revolving a mouthful of biscuit, 'my sister calls Reverend Mother Rev Muv.'

There was some giggling at this, but it was the wary, *ought-we-to* kind. Obviously, there was no hope of leading a rebellion on Sister Traise's behalf, like they would in school-girl stories. Perhaps Convents were different. Nobody wrote about them, so how were you to know?

Rev Muv's bath chair creaked faintly in the distance. What a size the woman was! Always ill, too. Every few months she was dying, and had the Last Sacrament. Meanwhile, Sister Edith had been whipping round with her tongue, extorting so many hundreds of prayers and masses that Rev Muv recovered, and a miracle was announced to the assembled school. It seemed a shame, really, Iris thought. No fun being trundled about in a bath chair, having Sister Edith bossing you about in her subtle way, doing all your work – and loving it, of course. There seemed no hope of a peaceful end for Rev Muv until Sister Edith died herself.

Supposing Sister Traise were very ill. Would anyone mind? Would Sister Edith drag her back from death's jaws? Not on your life! Sister Traise had no authority. The girls did what they liked with her. Her only use was for lengthening everyone else's lessons.

'Very well,' thought Iris, tracing a pattern in the gravel with her toe, 'that's the last time I save Rev Muv just so's Sister Edith can be boss for another term. I shall write down the three-figure numbers in each column of the paper she hands round, but not one of them shall scorch my lips.'

This seemed an admirable revenge until Iris remembered her first term at the Convent. The document had been passed solemnly round her form, and not knowing what it was from Adam, she

had modestly beaten the girl before her by ten pips under each heading. And nobody had been any the wiser. After the miracle, the totals were proudly presented to Rev Muv and hymns were sung. No, it wasn't really satisfactory. Iris was that odious thing spat from sister Edith's lips like a piece of gristle: A Protestant. So her contributions were doubtless sprinkled with holy water before being used – if used at all, that is.

In fact, it wasn't until the end of the Summer Term that Iris found a revenge worthy of Sister Traise, though she thought about it constantly. In the Christmas holidays, all the girls had to send holy cards to Rev Muv and Sister Edith, and in the Summer holidays they were expected to write letters in their best writing to the same two nuns. They weren't answered, of course, but no one would have dreamed of neglecting this act of respect.

But one day, when the Stewart family were sprawled on a sunny beach, and Iris was sniffing the salty tang on her forearm, she said suddenly:

'This afternoon I'm going to write a nice letter to Sister Traise.'

'Good lord!' said Magda disgustedly.

'Good gracious!' said their mother absently, 'I thought she only taught needlework.'

'Yes,' Iris said, tasting her elbow grimly, 'quite so. She doesn't count. She gets squashed. They're all beasts to her.'

'Oh, dear!'

'Don't be feeble,' snapped Magda, 'she's nearly as feeble as you are, which is saying something.'

'She's the only nunnish nun out of the whole lot, so snubs! It's been perfectly awful for her ever since she won the Grand National.'

'Ever since she *what*?' Mrs Stewart echoed blankly.

'Won the Grand National. You see, Mummy, so many of them being Irish, they listen in on their crackly old wireless and have pretend bets. This year, Sister Traise's horse won, easily.'

'More fool her,' snorted Magda, 'should've had more sense. Everyone knows it's fixed. Either Rev Muv or Sister Edith win,

or else nobody at all. She should've changed her mind as soon as her horse came into the lead. You can't have a *French* nun butting in and bagging your private race. I *ask* you! I always said she was only fit to teach sewing!

'I'm sure she was given a hefty penance for *that* piece of insubordination!' chuckled Mrs Stewart.

Magda and Iris glanced at their mother disapprovingly. All very well for *them* to make jokes about the Convent, but it didn't do for parents. Iris said loudly:

'Well, I'm glad she won, and I jolly well told her so.'

'Bet you didn't say it in front of the class!'

'No,' Iris admitted in a small voice. As a matter of fact, she'd had to chase Sister Traise round the rose garden where she was busy meditating.

'I suppose you're aiming to be her *pet*!' Magda said nastily, 'fancy anyone wanting to be Sister Traise's pet!'

'Oo, you pig, Magda!'

'Now, now, don't let's get excited,' Mrs Stewart put in hurriedly, 'so long as you write to Sister Edith as well, I suppose it'll be all right.'

'I am only writing to Sister Traise, Mummy.'

'Oh, my goodness!' Mrs Stewart blenched a little. There was something *about* that Sister Edith . . .

'Quite all right, Mummy,' Magda said loftily, 'they'll just think she's cracked, that's all.'

So Iris wrote her nice letter to Sister Traise, telling her about the seaside, and how brown they were. She refused her mother's flustered offer of a stamp, and bought her own. She went off by herself to post it in private. She had marked it 'Personal'. Rev Muv – or Sister Edith – opened all letters addressed to the nuns. Perhaps this would be the first private letter Sister Traise had had for simply years. Iris imagined her face as she read it – like it had been at the bazaar last term. The parents had straggled away, and Iris had stayed behind to help clear up (because she'd found it annoyed Sister Edith if she was too virtuous, being a Protestant). Rev Muv, nodding benignly in her bath chair, gathered the

nuns about her skirts, and gave them sixpence each to spend.

Oh, what a flurry! What crows and squeals of delight! Off they scampered in their heavy skirts, rushing from stall to stall, skipping and twittering and bumping into each other like excited children. The sweet agony of indecision! But Sister Traise, her movements more self-effacing than ever, glided with apologetic gait straight to the little silver thimble marked sixpence. Had she never had her very own thimble? Iris wondered, watching her softly. Sister Traise stood at the stall, her plain smile spreading and spreading. She stretched out a hand, hesitant, unbelieving. And then, a hollow cackle, and there was Sister Françoise, elbowing and pushing, making it look like a game. But it wasn't. She knew. She snatched up the thimble in bony fingers and ran braying to show Rev Muv, and pay back her sixpence.

The letter slipped down the belly of the post box, and Iris sighed. If only she were brave. If only she had the courage to send Sister Traise a silver thimble of her very own. . . . But then, presents were confiscated. Flowers were allowed, but they'd only be passed on to Our Lady . . .

Exactly two days later, there came a letter from Sister Traise to Iris – an unheard of happening. It was in French. 'Pariez Français!' Sister's reproachful voice seemed to bleat.

'Well, I'm blowed!' was Iris's first reaction. 'Tactless of her,' she amended. 'I expect she meant well,' she decided finally. But she rather felt she had been taken advantage of, and was henceforth expected to be a goody-goody example to the class.

But the letter itself, after its laborious translation, was no mean reward. There wasn't much of it, and the sentences were as prim and pruned as you'd expect. But the writing! Large, flowing, and beautiful, for the most part – the nuns all wrote with the same cultivated perfection – but escaping here and there like Sister's rebellious hair, tumbling and trembling with excitement. It looked so happy. And there was a real live smudge, too.

When they were home again, the reports had come. Magda's was excellent. Sister Agnes loved lavishing superlatives on her star pupils. Iris had 'Fair', 'Only Fair', or 'Could Do Better', for

all Sister Edith's subjects. Sister Françoise, in her narrow sloping hand, had written 'Inattentive', amongst other depressing things. Funny, because Iris had lain in wait most attentively with a bucket of expressionless cold water, for those three jokes, every time, every lesson, until Sister Françoise became so unnerved she had been forced to abandon them altogether. But 'Fair', 'Only Fair', and 'Room for Improvement' . . .

'It's not fair at all,' Iris said to her mother, 'English and History are my best subjects. She's got her knife into me, that's what it is.'

Magda laughed the superior laugh of Form Six, Upper Division.

'My dear child, Ma Edith's got her knife into *every* Protestant!' She spat out the word so well that she had to fumble round her knicker leg for a hanky. 'Thank goodness we only have her for Scripture. Even so, it's amazing the number of digs she squeezes into half an hour. I suppose you know there's no hope for your soul, Mummy?'

'Oh, I say!' Mrs Stewart protested nervously.

'You might just as well smash the crockery and slosh Daddy over the head whenever you feel the urge. Makes no odds. You're damned anyway.'

'Oh good,' Iris interrupted, 'I noticed she always took off five marks for bad writing if I did anything too well, but I thought she just had it in for me.'

'So she has. She specially hates anyone feeble like you – or Sister Traise, who can't stand up for her soppy self. She marks me quite fairly – well, almost. She has to take off a bit for being a Protestant –' Magda spat again, and Iris giggled delightedly, 'but when you're a heathen *and* a wet – well, I *ask* you! Besides, we're marked out of twenty, not ten, in the Seniors, and that gives more room for spite. She can't often wangle me down to the mark of the brightest Catholic.'

'Really makes one smile,' said Mrs Stewart, not smiling, 'when the school would be sunk without all the Church of England children. Never mind, Iris, only another year, and then you'll be in the Senior School. You'll have Sister Agnes.'

'Ah, now you're talking!' said Magda briskly, for Sister Agnes a great jolly giant of a woman of over seventy, would not have minded a class of Mahomedans, so long as they enjoyed her rollicking lessons half as much as she enjoyed giving them. Abounding in girlish enthusiasm, she bolted *The Times* every day, and glued her grey ear to the crackly old wireless for all news and political talks.

'Yes,' Iris said doubtfully, 'but she smells.'

'Old people sometimes get . . . a little careless in their habits,' said her mother fastidiously.

'Nothing to do with oldness,' retorted Magda hotly, 'or habits, for that matter; they have two sets of clothes. Intellect is all that counts, to Sister Agnes. And anyway, she doesn't smell on Mondays.'

'Sister Traise doesn't smell on any day.'

'Naturally not, you poor fool. She has no brain.'

'Well, I like that!'

Mrs Stewart rustled the reports agitatedly.

'I shouldn't worry any more about Sister Edith, darling. You'll get on better with Sister Agnes next year. She's Irish,' she explained respectfully, being Irish herself.

'So is Sister Edith,' Iris said flatly.

'From the South,' her mother corrected.

Iris always had a bout of crying on the last day of the holidays, and indeed, she felt as wretched as though she were a boarder, whereas she even came home to lunch every day.

The first nun she saw when she pushed open the creaky gate, an awful sinking feeling inside her, was Sister Traise, hovering in the courtyard and beaming a welcome to every girl who came in. When she and Iris saw each other, they went simultaneously pink with embarrassment, smiled a little breathlessly, and then Sister scuttled off in her dusty shoes, one lace trailing, a flash of wrinkled black stocking at each step. The fact was Iris still felt some misgivings. If Sister Traise now expected her to parlez Français the whole time and keep piously apart from the general uproar of the sewing lessons, well it couldn't be done. It was too

much to expect. But as things turned out, she needn't have worried.

Sister Traise continued to blush with guilty pagan pleasure every time they met unawares, but her lessons were different now. She no longer looked anxious and fearful in a way that invited ragging. Her shiny face was shinier, and the dull patient eyes were lit with warmth. She even laughed sometimes, and the girls, surprised, laughed with her. And as for speaking French, she turned a deaf ear and only remonstrated when the noise was too loud in either language. But the other nuns continued to snip pieces off her lessons, both ends, and all Sister Traise's frail confidence deserted her at these crises. She was her old, non-plussed self again.

Now that Sister Françoise had surrendered her three fonny jokes, Iris had to find a new revenge. It was some weeks before Pamela accidentally dropped her pencil box, and Iris saw the crash pass through Sister's nervy body like an electric shock. After that, she became strangely careless – only now and then, mind you – about sweeping things off her desk when using her rubber, or letting her desk lid slam when she was groping for a grammar. Then Sister Françoise's button boots would leave the ground, her button eyes close in pain, her features freeze with tension, and she'd round on the culprit with all the venom at her disposal, which was much. Iris was sometimes reduced to tears, but it was always worth it – later on.

There still remained Sister Edith, the prime mover in the slow martyrdom of Sister Traise. After all, burning at the stake was one thing. . . . There was no way of gauging the effect of the holiday letter, since Sister Edith had always been at her iciest with Iris anyway. And letters to her from Protestants-and-wets were doubtless picked up with tweezers and thrown away unopened.

Ever since Magda's remarks about Sister Edith's methods of marking, Iris had had a vague feeling there might be scope in that direction. But nothing coherent evolved until Sister Edith set her first essay of the new term. It was on 'The Happiest Day of

My Life'. After the usual blank reception, humdrum ideas settled on the girls' faces like flies, and one by one they began to write, their heads circling from side to side, their elbows cramped to their ribs, their fingers white with pressing the pens to the service of beautiful writing. Iris's head stayed up. She looked at Pamela. She stared at the Chidley sisters, Oh, she knew exactly what everyone – including the Roman Catholics – was writing about. The new bicycle, the baby brother, the double-figures birthday, the holiday abroad. . . . With a thoughtful look at Sister Edith's proud pose at the desk, Iris started to write: 'I can truthfully say that the happiest day of my life was the occasion of my First Holy Communion. . . .'

She wrote as one inspired. It was the best essay she had ever done. She'd had no idea herself quite how deeply she felt about her religion. And she was absolutely right about the others, too. She trotted from one Catholic to another during break, and they'd all chosen new bikes or brothers or holidays abroad.

The following Tuesday, Sister Edith came into the class with a face of iron. She handed back the essays without any sarcasm at all, to anyone. Iris's had three spelling corrections, but was otherwise untouched. It was marked eight out of ten. It deserved nine, she thought, but there was no biting phrase at the bottom and nothing taken off for bad writing. After that, Sister Edith avoided looking straight at Iris, who, sensing the nun's frustration, set herself to work in earnest.

She learnt her preps by heart, word for word. If the written homework floored her, she pestered her parents until one of them helped her understand. She did secret revisions and extra prep, so that Sister Edith's famous catch-you-napping tests, sprung on the class without warning, served only to show up Iris's sudden brilliance, beside which the Roman Catholics, weighed down with nightly catechism to learn and religious exams to swot for, looked as dull as tarnished silver. Sister Edith grew quieter as the year progressed. She tried this trick and that dodge, but Iris was always one jump – or chapter – ahead of her. She even sprung a desk inspection when it was least expected, and opened her mouth

to say her usual: 'Untidy desk, untidy mind,' but Iris's was the neatest of all, and there wasn't a film star in sight. Sister Edith's lashing tongue began to lose some of its spirit. There was a hint of despair in her attitude at Prayers. She seemed haunted by something, or someone . . .

The long-awaited day of reckoning came on Prize Day. The nuns sat in a long line one end of the hall, the school in neat rows according to class and height, at the other. Sister Françoise sat tensely, with twitching lips and eyes snapping like poppers. Sister Traise was nearest the door and the draught, ready to pad off on an errand, or open the door for her betters. Her hands folded resignedly in her lap, her bonnet slightly askew, she lifted her palely glowing eyes when Iris's name was called out.

Iris stood up. Sister Edith, her voice, body and features like granite, her mouth making the merest pinching movement, read out:

'Form Four. Iris Stewart, First Prize for English, History, Geography, Mathematics, Composition . . .'

There was a faint stirring. The nuns glanced significantly at each other. Rev Muv, swathed in blankets, but recently rescued from the very gates of Heaven, nodded benevolently from her bath chair.

Iris walked up the centre aisle. She kept her eyes, suitably masked with humility, fixed on Sister Edith's face. She realized Sister Traise's plain smile spreading and spreading, and heard Sister Agnes making a gabbling noise to someone and being shushed by Rev Muv. As Iris tiptoed reverently into the area of purity, Sister Agnes, preceded by her Wednesday whiff, leaned forward to bob her bonnet at her future pupil, giggling with excitement, the fingers of one hand held straightly over her front teeth, which were unsightly.

Iris took the book cautiously from Sister Edith's cold fingers, which might have stung if she'd touched them. She dropped a curtsy. Their eyes met. The impact was like a violent clash of glaring colours. And then, the masks were back again. They resumed their respective parts.

‘Well done,’ said Sister Edith.

‘Merci, ma Sœur,’ whispered Iris, lowering her eyes, blushing, fumbling her way to her place.

She sat down. The book made a heaviness on her knee. Inside was the list of subjects, in Sister Edith’s perfect writing. Even Scripture! What it must have cost her! Roman Catholics had a separate prize for each subject. But what matter? Sister Traise was avenged at last, and every year until Iris left school, would be avenged again.

Chance of a Lifetime

When I awoke this morning, the birds were bursting their throats with song, almost as if they were heralding the proudest day of my life. My chance to prove myself a musician had come at last.

You see, my elder sister Magda has always been the pianist of the family. She inherits a musical gift from Mummy, who has the most beautiful soprano voice you ever heard. I used to feel so hopeless beside them, and yet, I just had to be a musician somehow. Well, it couldn't be the piano, because I was ashamed to practise if Magda was in, and I'd never dared to see if there was a voice in my throat.

But the loveliest instrument of all is the flute, which Mummy has always wanted my brother Philip to learn, only he's too busy studying ants. The minute he comes in from school, down the garden he goes to the rockery, where he spends hours turning over stones. Whenever I'd said I'd like to learn the flute, nobody took much notice. They thought it was one of those things which would wear off if they were patient – like John Gielgud or collecting matchboxes

So when I left school last year, I wrote 'flute' on my Christmas list. I don't think I've ever been so excited on Christmas Eve before. It was rather like when I'd felt in my bones there was a new doll on the way – only much, much more so, of course. My whole life was standing on tiptoe.

Early on Christmas morning, I woke to feel the lumpy pillow case on my feet. I pulled it up, and groped inside for the right-shaped parcel. Yes, there it was; long, and thin. I unwrapped it, almost hushing the tissue paper. It was such a holy moment. I laid it on the bed, and stared at it for a long time. It was shorter than I'd expected, but then I'd never actually seen a flute, just heard them on the wireless. I thought of those rich, round sounds which make you go all shivery; and I looked at the little

pipe, imagining those sounds packed tight inside it, waiting . . . longing to come out.

Then Mummy came in, and when I'd thanked her, she said: 'Well, I'm pleased you like it, because there were some very long things, but they were awfully expensive, and anyway, they looked too difficult for you to play, so in the end I decided on this, and the man said they do call them flutes as well.'

Every spare minute of the next few days, I tried to play my flute. But it only made thin, squeaky noises, nothing like the silvery sounds which creep in and out of symphonies. I knew it must be my fault, so I asked Mummy if I could have some lessons, and she rang up her friend whose husband is a famous composer. They arranged for a real music student to give me six lessons. Six whole lessons! I could hardly believe it.

When I went to Miss Sand's flat for the first time, it was so exciting I barely had the strength to ring the bell. Inside, Miss Sand was practising, and it sounded just like the wireless. And then, when she opened the door – why, she wasn't much older than me! I felt awful. What must she think of a big grown-up of seventeen only just starting the flute? If only I wasn't so tall. I began to feel older, and taller, and more and more stupid, as I slowly took off my coat. Miss Sand was peering round me with a puzzled look on her face.

'Well, where's your flute?' she asked.

'Oh . . . here,' and I pulled it out of my pocket.

And then Miss Sand started to laugh.

'That's not a flute!' she chuckled, and after I'd tried to see the joke, she went very serious and kind, and explained that any fool can play a fife, you don't need lessons for that. She showed me her flute, and the beauty of it just took my breath away. It was at least twice as long as mine, and jittering with keys wherever you looked.

'What,' I whispered, 'is the least you have to pay for one of those?'

Miss Sand looked doubtful.

'Mine cost fifty pounds – but it's a specially good one,' she

added quickly, 'you can buy metal ones for . . . Oh, ten pounds upwards.'

'Not wooden ones?' I asked sadly, for the one in her hands simply breathed oldness.

'The silver ones are better at that price, and easier to learn on,' Miss Sand said.

'All right,' I told her, 'I shall come next week with a proper flute, like yours,' and I stared at the miraculous thing until I knew it by heart.

I went home feeling all hot and squirmy inside. Miss Sand must think me so ignorant. I remembered what Mummy had said about a real flute being too difficult for me. She didn't think I was any good.

Well, I drew out the ten pounds in my Post Office book, and bought a flute – only a humble metal one, but it had enough keys; I was careful to count them before I said it would do. I carried it home, nestling in its plushy case. Every time I crossed the road I imagined it being jerked out of my grasp, crashing to the ground, and being scrunched to a powder by a bus. But we reached home safely and Philip was tremendously awed. We took turns in trying to make it sound, and after hours and hours, a tiny crumb of a note slunk out of the end, quite wrapped round in wheeze. The next day, I pushed out a whole scale, still very furry. The flautists on the radio made big, creamy notes, and that was how it had to be, even if it took all my life.

I was terribly ashamed at my next lesson, but Miss Sand was surprised, and said it had taken her a week to make any noise at all. She even said I had a natural embouchure (that's the face you make when you blow). It was so wonderful, I hoped she might forget about the fife, in time. I told them at home what she'd said, and they smiled faraway smiles, and said: 'That's splendid . . . isn't it?' And then I realized they didn't know what embouchure meant – not even Magda. Such a thing had never happened to me before.

When I'd learnt my first piece, I asked Magda to play the accompaniment, but she made all sorts of excuses, and in the

end Mummy said 'Oh for heaven's sake, Magda, play it through once. It won't kill you,' and Magda replied darkly: 'That's all *you* know.' Of course, she isn't so keen on the piano, or the flute, since her College boy friend, Chris, said music got on his nerves. He has insomnia, you know. Magda says that true love is a knitting together of souls. . . . That makes such a busy little picture, doesn't it?

When it came to my fifth lesson, Miss Sand said I ought to join an amateur orchestra. Mummy rang up Mrs Humphries again, who suggested the one her husband conducts. She said, wasn't it awfully good of the Humphries? They don't have beginners ordinarily. It seemed like a dream. This was the best-known of amateur orchestras. It was nearly famous, in fact.

I shall never forget that first rehearsal. There were hundreds and hundreds of musicians who all knew each other very well. They smiled and talked, but whenever I smiled at a face, it slammed shut. I suppose it *was* rather a cheek; they were all so much older than me. But Miss Sand knew one of the flautists, and she'd asked her to be nice to me, so she was. I sat beside her, watching her out of the corner of my eye, so that I'd know when to play. It would be so dreadful if I played a wrong note, and they all stared. I looked along our line, and peeped behind at the brass, and you've never seen such extraordinary-looking instruments as some of them. When they started playing - it was a Mozart overture - a great warmth of sound suddenly rose up and folded over me. I just laid down my flute and listened. I was right inside music. It was drawing me into its heart. Then they stopped for a minute, and Miss Crawford, the other flute, told me I must count all the time, and not listen to anybody else. I tried, but they all went so fast. I felt like Philip when he was little, trying to keep up with Magda and me. Now and then, Mr Humphries tapped with his baton, and said: 'Back to letter B -' or 'bar eighty-nine,' but by the time I'd found where he meant, they were off again, and I sat with my flute in mid-air, feeling so stupid. It was as bad as being the only one who couldn't do a hand stand, at school. Soon I began to feel desperate. The music was winding

and coiling round me, slipping away like a will-o'-the-wisp as soon as I nearly caught up, as if it were laughing at me. Then, just when I couldn't have borne the shame a second longer, I played a note. It gave me such a shock I lost the place at once, and didn't find it again for ages. But, I had played a note.

The me who'd walked into that rehearsal room, and the me who left it, were not the same. One was just an empty shell. The other was aching with fullness. So many feelings surged and throbbed inside me. Despair, because they were so good and I was so bad; Hope, because of the one note; a shivery kind of happiness; a tight, clenched feeling of purpose; a longing to be always with music; and over all, a strange bewilderment at the immensity of Life.

Gradually, week by week, the pages in front of me grew less like jigsaw puzzles. When everyone was playing, I was quite happy playing quietly underneath. You can't hear yourself, you see. But suddenly the flutes would be left on their own, washed up on a lonely shore. That was awful. I felt everyone staring, and thinking what a horrible weedy sound that girl makes. I wasn't even worth smiling at – not that I expected otherwise, of course. After all, I was only there because of Mummy and Mrs Humphries. But it was fun just watching them all, and making up nicknames, which I told Philip afterwards. There was the man with the green face, whom I called the Dead Man. There were lots of old ladies who rambled on through silent bars and made rushes in the pauses. There was a tiny violinist quite bent double with age, who was stone deaf. He couldn't straighten enough to see the beat, being just under it, and he couldn't hear when Mr Humphries said Stop. He just played on without a break, from the start of the rehearsal until he realized everyone else was packing up their instruments.

One Tuesday evening, after the rehearsal, Mr Humphries tapped his music stand for silence, and tapped the deaf man on the shoulder, and then said:

'The concert will be held on December the fifth . . .'

He gave out some more details, but I scarcely took them in.

I was seeing myself sitting on a platform with everyone watching. This was my great chance. Once in a lifetime, they say it happens. When the family saw me playing at a concert, before an audience, they'd know I was serious, and it wasn't just a phase I was going through. Besides, training to be a real musician is so expensive. I had to prove I was worth it.

For the next three weeks I thought of nothing else. The music sang in my blood, and beat in my pulses. To the end of my days, whenever I heard Beethoven Seven, it would bring back this turning-point in my life. I sent tickets round the family, including cousin Oliver, who is an intellectual and says the most outrageous things to shock people. I sent two to his brothers, in case they might be proud to be related to me. When it came to inviting friends, there really wasn't anybody except Kenneth, whom I call my first boy friend, since there's no choice. Kenneth is very artistic, and reminds one of Apollo. He has long eyelashes and the sort of ties which made Daddy goggle. He has Turkish baths and eats snails, so you see, he is unusual. Philip says Kenneth is a Wet, and when Magda heard I'd sent him a ticket, she gave a short laugh and said:

'Good lord!'

But then, she's extra superior these days. She says Chris has put her wise to the lesser-known facts of life.

Anyway, since I'd never have another chance like this, I had to ask everybody. Philip was allowed to stay up late, it being a special occasion, and on the day itself, he followed me around like a shadow, until I thought what a great pity everyone isn't like Philip, who's proud of me for no reason at all. Daddy was excused, because Mummy said he might snore, or worse still, break his record of thirteen deafening sneezes.

I spent hours preparing myself. A scented bath, hair curlers, a black dress which Mummy had forgotten she had after all these years, and earrings which made a maddening itch. You see, Mummy kept worrying about the blackness of the effect, and saying:

'Your pearls would help.'

I explained that it just isn't Done in orchestras. All Black, is what they said.

'Well, a brooch would hardly notice.'

But I couldn't make a fool of myself and show I didn't know any better. In the end, we settled with earrings, which I was able to hide with hair.

We three travelled to the hall together. Magda said she might drop in with Chris if his nerves were strong enough that day. The cousins were already there when we arrived. Oliver smiled his crooked smile and said something cynical which nobody understood. Kenneth was there too, looking artistic, and gazing at Oliver in a funny sort of way. I told them all where to look for the Green Man, the dear little deaf man, and a few others who make faces or shudder when they're playing. Half-way down the hall, I remembered the old lady who plays passionate jumbles in the silent bars, so I dashed back to tell them. Then I rustled off to the bandroom, as they call it, and just as I opened the door, I heard someone saying:

'... and then she solemnly produced a fife!'

I shut the door on the shrieks of laughter, and waited outside for a long time before I'd screwed up enough courage to go in. I was burning with shame. Everyone knew how ignorant and idiotic I was. But it was too late now. Taking a deep breath, I swished into the little room thick with people, and smiled a general kind of smile, not expecting it to be answered.

The talking died away. Hundreds of heads turned, and gaped at me as if I were an apparition. I clicked open my flute case casually, though my heart was thudding, and my mouth was quite dry. Miss Crawford came over to me, and said awkwardly:

'Oh... Hullo.'

'Hullo,' I said, 'isn't this nerve-racking?'

'Yes,' she replied faintly, 'but who told you that *you* were playing in the concert?'

I blew down my flute to warm it up, and rattled the keys like they do. Then, her words made dents in my mind.

'What do you mean? Everyone plays in the concert . . . don't they?'

Miss Crawford went redder than ever, and licked her lips several times.

'Well, you see,' she began, frowning intently as if picking out the words with tweezers, 'we only need two flutes for the works we're doing. None of the extra players are here. Mr Humphries expects only the . . . well, the more experienced players to perform at the concerts. I thought you were coming with all your friends just to listen. . . .'

I put my flute back in its case. My voice said for me:

'Oh, how ridiculous of me! I'm awfully sorry,' and I went out quickly before the thousands of eyes drilled holes through me.

I stood in a dark corner of the hall. I could see Philip lean forward as the orchestra strolled on to the stage. His face was white with emotion. Perhaps it wasn't all for me, though. Perhaps he was mentally pulling apart each instrument as it was carried on. Mummy was craning her neck this way and that, arranging a radiant smile for when I saw her. And over there was Kenneth with his curly mouth and soft eyes . . . Oliver being sternly intellectual . . . Magda and Chris looking knitted . . . the cousins . . . the aunts . . .

They were all waiting to see me walk on.

The June Ball

The room is a blurr of lights and colours. People are dancing; people are standing in groups talking in loud unnatural voices; the hostess is mincing round with a tray of ices, saying jolly things, clever things, and breezy things. I keep telling myself that this is what is called 'having a good time'. This is what is termed 'having fun'. All my family say 'Enjoy yourself while you're still young; youth goes so quickly; go to parties and dances; see life, and meet people; that is the thing to do.' So it must be right, and I must be wrong. My elder sister enjoys it, and has fun. She comes back from dances looking radiant and happy, and she is never tired the next day.

I am at a dance now, feeling conscious of every inch of my dress, every hair on my head, every pore on my face. I am feeling aware of myself all over. But it isn't that exciting kind of consciousness which I used to get as a child, suddenly, without warning, a sort of realization that I was me, a very tiny but alive Me in a huge expanse of space. This is different. If somebody comes up to me for a dance, my pulses start hammering, my knees stop being knees, and I know that I can't really dance a step. He says 'Shall we dance?' and I smile confidently in return. We circle round, each saying 'Sorry' in turn, or sometimes 'No, my fault', but it is mine all the time, and the maddening thing is that I needn't make all those mistakes. I'm just afraid I'm not going to be able to follow, and so I don't.

The dance seems never-ending, and then we talk polite talk which I find so difficult because it always sounds to me like something I have read in a funny story. If only they talked about music or books it would be easy. Then there comes that awful pause. We look abstractly round the room, back at each other again, and smile encouragingly, and look away again. Worst of all, he may offer me a cigarette in desperation, and after blowing out his lighter three times, I take small puffs and am careful not

to cough, because that shows you don't know how to smoke. I feel a tickle starting in my throat, and the more I pretend it isn't there, the more it is there, until my eyes water and I make an explosive sound which is far worse than an ordinary cough.

All this time, the ash on the cigarette is growing longer, and I can't see an ashtray anywhere near. I don't seem able to say so, and still less can I walk casually over to that small table where there are two ashtrays, although it isn't very far away. I watch the ash growing and growing, tilting the cigarette in a certain way so as to balance it a bit longer. But in the end, it falls with no sound at all, though it might as well be a thunderclap. On to the highly polished floor it falls, and my inside turns three somersaults, bounces out of the top of my head, reels round the room, and comes back in a rush through the soles of my shoes. I imagine that everyone in the room has seen it happen, and I can never decide whether to put my foot on the ash, or to pretend it isn't there, or to treat it with surprise as if it had suddenly grown up out of the floor.

While I am making up my mind, another man approaches me for a dance, the first one looks relieved, and the whole beastly business begins again. When I'm not dancing, I watch the other couples revolving round the room, knowing that they are having enormous fun, though actually they look awfully bored, but that is just the English way of enjoying things to the full. When I get home, I shall tell Mummy how much I enjoyed myself and what a good time I had. She will be pleased, because she wants me to have a good time and she is happy when I get invitations to dances. She tells me about the good old days when one 'did something' every single evening, and what a pity it is that times have changed, and if Daddy had been a little younger when she married him (he's Retired Army) I would have had such a wonderful time with the battalion. Gay, and exciting. But the odd thing is that Mummy is a shy person too, and I feel she didn't enjoy dances as much as she thinks. Of course, it may be that she feels now she missed something in her youth and that's why she is so anxious for me not to miss it as well. So when I say 'Gosh, it was

wonderful fun!’ her face lights up which makes me think, well, perhaps it wasn’t so bad after all. But for weeks afterwards I keep remembering all the little things that made me go hot and cold, and then I go hot and cold again.

But the worst thing of all was the June Ball. I don’t think I shall ever get over that. I shall probably go hot and cold about it in my old age. You see, my cousin Tommy did the correct thing and went to Sandhurst, so the family were all proud of him. My uncle took us in his car to the Passing Out Parade, which was crowds, fanfares, bellowing, presenting arms, and other solemn and moving matters. When it was finished, my uncle said Tommy had done very well, and Daddy repeated this. When they looked round for my brother to tell him how to do things at Woolwich as opposed to Sandhurst, he was kneeling on the ground holding a magnifying glass over an almost invisible insect with lots of legs (only he told me later that some of the legs were really feelers). He feels very deeply about insects, especially ants, although Daddy impresses on him daily that the Army is the only manly career there is.

Tommy appeared, blushing furiously, and was congratulated, and after shaking hands all round, my uncle said to him ‘Why not show your cousins the grounds?’ My brother nudged me with the nudge which means ‘buzz off as if I’m with you as well,’ because he had discovered an animal pretending to be a small twig. So Tommy and I walked off, and for a while Tommy said ‘This is where we play cricket,’ or tennis, which ever it was, and ‘this is where we don’t play cricket (or tennis) because the ground is wavy,’ and remarks like that. I said ‘Yes’, and ‘Oh really?’ and ‘Do you?’ until Tommy suddenly said, for no reason at all: ‘After this, in a couple of weeks, comes the June Ball.’ I said ‘How exciting’, and as he didn’t answer, something made me say ‘Do you like dancing?’ He looked at me sharply, and after a moment’s pause, said in the merest whisper: ‘Well, actually, I don’t awfully.’ I was so amazed that I just stared at him, and then we both smiled like two conspirators, and started talking a great deal.

On the way home in the car, while Daddy and my uncle were

talking about Staff College and whether it was or it wasn't this and that, Mummy asked me what Tommy had talked about. I said 'Oh, he told me all about Sandhurst and things.' 'Did he say anything about the June Ball?' she asked. 'Well, he did mention it as something that was bound to happen,' I answered. Then my mother explained about the June Ball. She said it was an event that everyone who was anybody should go to at least once in their lifetime. That is, if they got the chance, and knew someone at Sandhurst. Such an opportunity was unequalled for importance. Every young girl longed to go to the June Ball before she died. And therefore, Mummy concluded, if Tommy hasn't already asked someone he will no doubt ask you

For the next two weeks I lived in dread of what each post and each ring of the telephone might bring. But at the same time, I felt guilty. It was so terrible not to want to go to the June Ball, and sometimes I nearly hoped that Tommy would ask me, because then Mummy would feel my life was complete. But nothing happened, and as the days drifted by I grew more and more secure. When the day itself loomed up, with no last-minute messages, I could hardly believe it. I was wild with triumph! I cleaned my teeth twice by mistake, and almost went out with odd shoes on, and after lunch I flung myself on the piano stool and sang at the top of my voice. I'd never dared to before, because Mummy and my elder sister are such good sopranos. It was a wonderful day, and I wrote it all down in my private diary. Mummy was disappointed for me naturally but she said bravely: 'Never mind, darling, next year perhaps. Tommy must have a girl friend after all.'

The following Sunday my uncle and aunt came down, and when I judged that the danger point for being asked to play a little something on the piano had passed, I went into the drawing-room. My sister was already there, and of course Mummy and Daddy. Usually, when one goes into the drawing-room with relations down for the day, there is a general murmur of 'ah', on different notes, followed by 'Well, well,' and 'Here's herself at last.' This time, none of that came, so I knew at once something

was wrong. They all looked at me very seriously. I sat down on the arm of a chair and smiled. Nobody smiled back. I thought it might be because I was sitting on the arm of the chair, so I sat on the floor. Still nobody spoke. My sister was looking at me with cold contempt, though that wouldn't have meant anything on its own. At length, my uncle said slowly:

'Tommy had nobody to take to the June Ball, so he didn't have much of a time. Bad show, you know.'

My father shook his head and murmured 'bad show', too, so I said, my heart beginning to beat quickly: 'How awful for him.'

'Yes,' continued my aunt, 'we asked why he hadn't asked you to go with him. And he said,' she paused, while all the eyes focused searchingly on me, 'he said that you'd said you didn't like dancing. In fact, it appears that you loathe dancing.'

There was a silence. They waited for me to speak. I began to stutter: 'Well, I didn't actually mean – what I really meant was – that is to say—' Then I stopped. All those eyes. Accusing, astonished eyes. You didn't want to go to the JUNE BALL? You didn't WANT to go to the June Ball? the eyes said incredulously. The girl's obviously mad, they seemed to say. Or at least, she's not normal. My uncle, who is R.A.M.C., was staring at me in a medical sort of way, but Mummy's eyes were just hurt and puzzled.

Suddenly I felt very ashamed, very small and mean. I had let the family down. They'd wanted to be proud of me, representing them at the June Ball. I was a bitter disappointment. And as my cheeks burned hotter and hotter, I realized the awful truth. I was a complete, an utter – failure.

Growing Pains

Rain was falling outside the classroom windows; rain, in dull gusts, making the sky grey and depressing, the playing-fields a soggy grey-green; the air close and heavy. Bent over desks scratched and initialled by previous victims, were about twenty boys, all round the age of fifteen. There was Biggs, learned and staid, with glasses and watery blue eyes; Spreadly, who alternately scratched the heads from his multiple spots and gnawed his grubby finger-nails; White, the Apollo of the form, with fair curly hair and a fresh complexion; Derry and Blake, two sinister characters who produced the dirtiest stories in the school, and who were hence treated with awe by the younger boys, and with due respect by the seniors.

Jim Saunders was idly watching the rain, and the undulating waves of mist it made sweeping over the grass. Dimly he heard the monotonous drone of his form master's voice, and for a minute was oblivious of everything. Then he roused himself, and told himself he was bloody bored. He glanced at the boy next to him, Fred Down, a study of virtuous attention, hypocrisy radiating from his smug soap-and-water face, and a wave of disgust swept over him. He passionately longed to batter in the perfect visage, and see the warm blood flowing . . .

But they walked out of the building together, caps on the back of their heads, affecting nonchalance. Neither spoke until they were on the bus, then Fred said, in his ultra-refined accent:

'I say, let's go to a flick. There's something quite good on in the village.'

Jim nodded, unenthusiastically; Would never do to show appreciation at a suggestion of that bastard. He felt refreshed, stimulated, as the word rolled off his mind like the drops of rain off Fred's greasy hair, carefully arranged in oily waves.

They sat in the cinema. The film had already started. It was a hackneyed affair of racketeers and reporters. There was one good

close-up of a girl in pyjamas, low-necked. . . . Jim roused himself out of his lethargy. His hands grew hot and sticky as he watched her, lying there. A host of Fred's filthy stories welled up in his mind, and as swiftly sank again into a void of doubts and panic. Fred nudged him, and winked wickedly, or so he hoped. The other boy sensed a revolt within him. His mind flamed into a query. He didn't want to revel in pictures of nude women, or chew Fred's stories into his system, and yet . . .

The film wound its weary way, and now it was almost finished. Just before the end, two girls pushed their way past them to the remaining seats in the row. As they passed Jim, one of them brushed her fingers lightly, almost lazily, up his legs, as he sat there. He heard them giggling, down the row. He sat motionless, a glow of – first shame, hotness, confusion, then – a great clearing of mind, a sort of relief. And he felt, underneath, that this was wrong. He longed furtively for it to happen again; to feel that careless but sensuous gesture. Then he scowled, recollected himself, glanced down the line to where they sat, fluffy painted creatures, whispering together with arms round each other's neck.

'Bitches,' he thought savagely, and again let the taste of the word linger lusciously in his mouth. He looked at Fred, and laughed inwardly. Fred, with all his jokes and perfect manners, would never dare kiss a girl. This was a new train of thought. Would *he* dare? He wriggled uncomfortably, and felt himself blushing in the dark. Queer life . . .

He felt very proud on Sunday. It was his first tennis party; his own too. He spent a long time changing, conscious that he looked well in tennis kit; straight, with broad shoulders. He cast a worried look at his spots, which had suffered during an effort to shave with his father's razor. Then he brightened. Iris had spots herself. Not so many, perhaps, and she disguised them with powder, which was an unfair advantage. Still, she *had* them.

He walked down to the courts, swinging his racquet, his sweater slung round his neck, feeling the vital importance of impending manhood. In the distance, he could see Iris in her short white dress, brown curls tied back with a bright scarlet ribbon

from her pale face. His heart warmed within him. He liked the way she moved her hips when she walked; it was unconscious, but suggestive . . .

Then he swore softly. The little bitch was talking to Fred, speaking with little gestures, and looking up at him provocatively. Christ, the boy was conceited enough as it was, and there was Joan the other side of him, waiting to chip in and secure his attention. He sighed heavily. Girls were all the same, but he had thought that Iris . . . Tears pricked the insides of his eyelids, and he hurried forward and caught the others up. They greeted him shyly, and suddenly all their vitality which had been so evident before he had reached them, seemed to drain itself out, leaving them silent and self-conscious. He felt miserable, and covered it with a layer of facetiousness. Iris wouldn't respond to his questions properly, just answering 'yes' or 'no'. Surely they didn't really prefer that bastard to him. It was not to be thought of.

They had to pass through an alley way to get to the courts. Only two could walk abreast. He kicked Fred, forcing him to march ahead with Joan, and he took his place blissfully beside Iris. Before he permitted his eyes to dwell on her, he looked triumphantly at the lumpy figure of Joan in front of him. Fat sow, he thought distastefully, watching her behind vibrating at each step; probably sweats a lot too. But Iris trod quietly beside him, and he could see the tilt of her nose and the faint smile she always had when with him.

'What are you thinking about?' he whispered, making a grab at her hand.

'You.'

She knew the answers expected of her, and anyway, if not strictly true, it pleased him. Besides, his attentions annoyed Magda, so were thus valuable. But Jim was so *young*. She looked regretfully at Fred, who was nearer her own age, seventeen. He had black hair. If only he would stop using that foul oil. What a mess for his mother to wash! Pillow-cases, too. She disengaged her arm gently, explaining that the other two might glance round. He brought his hand back to his side, brushing it down her

thigh as he did so. After a few seconds he stole a look at her. She was gazing ahead, with her faint smile. Was it sardonic, or was that just his imagination?

'Silly ass,' she was thinking, 'thinks I don't see through those little things. Treats it as if it was something of terrific importance.'

They reached the courts, and the boys paid, thus increasing their sense of masculine domination. Iris removed the scarlet jacket she wore for Jim's especial benefit. She thought sombrely, as she slipped it off, of the extra curlers she had put in her hair the night before. They had pinched all night long. . . . Was it worth it? Damn, her shoe was undone again. She stooped to fasten it, bending from the waist. The front of her dress was loose, and he saw, with a sickening bound of his heart, the soft shadow between her breasts. Involuntarily, he stepped forward slightly, leaning on his racquet, to get a better view, and then she stood up suddenly, and pushed back the hair fallen over her face.

'Toss, man!' said Fred crossly, having repeated it three times. Jim twisted the racquet dully. It fell with a thud to the soft grass, near her feet, and he bent to pick it up, seeing as he did so, the dark hairs on her legs. He had to grit his teeth to prevent the tears coming when he found himself partnered with Joan, fat and simpering.

He played badly, and this made him swagger still more. Even when they changed partners, and he took his place beside Iris, he was unhappy. He couldn't digest the picture of the girl stooping to flick up a ball that dropped just over the net: the quick swirl upwards of her skirt, and the flash of rounded thigh. It reminded him of the week they had spent with their families at the sea. They had lain on the beach and sunbathed, stretched out on their backs, on the hard little stones. She had flung her arm across her face to shield it from the sun, and the tiny points of dark bristles in her armpits, where she had shaved, gleamed in the bright sunlight. Ah, he thought exultantly, what marvellous self-control! But he knew he hadn't noticed then. Hadn't woken, as it were.

The game came to an end, and he cursed himself for his bad

play. He felt he had let Iris down, and must make up for it. He tried to persuade her to linger behind the other two on the way home, winking and making signs, but she was impatient and hungry. She thought: 'He's being as cocky as Philip after his first wet dream.'

They found tea laid in the garden in the shadow of the elm tree.

'Go and fetch some deck chairs,' Mrs Saunders called across the lawn.

'We'll go,' Jim said quickly, and signalled to Iris, who had flung herself on the grass. The chairs were in a shed at the end of the garden; it was dark and musty, and smelt as if there were rats as well as spiders. She shivered and retreated when a cobweb flapped against her face.

'It's all right,' the boy encouraged her, 'here, I'll pass them out to you. Put them on the grass.'

When the last was out, she stood up, and wiped her hands on her legs. The smell of sheds reminded her of her great-uncles . . .

'Here,' he beckoned, 'come in here. There's something I want to show you.'

She sighed, thinking of her tea, wondering what there'd be.

She stepped in, and stood enquiringly in front of him. Suddenly he grasped the collar of her dress, and muttered something inaudible. She thrust away his hand, and stared at him, partly with intense fear, partly with contempt. For a minute he glared back in mounting anger and bewilderment. He said with biting sarcasm:

'Don't worry, I wasn't going to hurt you.'

Then he pushed past her, and stumbled out into the open.

An Unregenerate Cousin

'Chris says I'm his ideal woman.' Magda announced fiercely, and took a large spoonful of porridge, snapping her teeth on the spoon as it went in.

Iris gasped softly: 'Good heavens!' and cut some crooked bread.

'Why "Good heavens"?' demanded Magda.

'Oh, nothing. That is, he's absolutely right. Oh, yes.'

Magda removed her piercing scrutiny and turned over the next page of her bulgy letter. Her features relaxed and became blurred with tenderness. Iris watched her curiously. Amazing thing, when you considered it. Having a sister who was an ideal woman. Living under the same roof. 'Iris Stewart? *You* know – the sister of Magda, the ideal woman.' Now Magda wasn't Magda any more. She was a symbol, a disembodied something.

'Chris says I'm the only woman he's ever wanted to maul.' She stared straight ahead grimly.

'No!' (Extraordinary muddle of Magda and Chris raging on the carpet like two lions.)

'But then, he says I have passion. You wouldn't understand. I doubt whether you've any sex at all.'

Iris looked up quickly.

'Do you really mean that?'

'I'm afraid so. You're utterly cold, in my opinion. Various men, besides Chris, have told me that you don't attract them in the slightest.'

Iris rustled her cornflakes dejectedly. No sex. Utterly cold. And her ambition from early childhood had been to play the flute and have twenty children, like Bach. Condemned to a barren life of loneliness. Of course, she told herself, I don't expect love. As Magda says, there's nothing *about* me. No character. No depth. I'm not vivacious like she is. But I did hope I had a little sex because then somebody might marry me by mistake.

'I'm going to dinner with Oliver on Tuesday, anyway,' she said quietly.

'Where?'

'In his flat.'

'Don't be a fool,' Magda said irritably. 'How can you be such a fool?'

'Why? He's our cousin. Mummy didn't say anything,' Iris replied righteously.

'Mummy is very innocent. The point is, you and I know Oliver's reputation.'

'Only what he says about himself, and I think he says it to shock you. Nobody knows what he's really like.'

'My sweet Iris, I'm older than you; you're only seventeen. Oliver's a . . . well, he's a sensualist.'

'I don't care. He's kind and I like him. *You'd* jolly well go.'

'Don't be a little ass. I wouldn't be so short-sighted as to run into such an obvious trap. Still, I don't mind. Please yourself. But watch your step, that's all.'

When Tuesday came, Iris made elaborate preparations with what make-up she possessed, and went so far as to clean her shoes without being reminded by her mother. Magda waylaid her in the hall and said, 'Well, good luck,' looking as ominous as she knew how. Iris walked off with a superior smile, but feeling as if she were going to the dentist. Following Oliver's written directions carefully, she arrived outside a small block of flats and stood for a while on the doorstep before summoning the courage to ring the bell.

'Is that you, Iris?'

A shock of hair appeared over the banisters and a tall untidy figure stumbled down the stairs. Iris realized suddenly that he did look rather decadent. She hadn't noticed it before. His clothes were ragged at the edges and he wore a red tie. His flat consisted of a bed-sitting-room and a tiny kitchen. Unlike the man, it was spotlessly tidy and most of the room was taken up by bookcases and neat piles of books. Iris started looking at some of the titles, and her astonishment grew every minute. She took one up and

opened it at random. Amazed, she sank on to the bed and read breathlessly.

'Aren't you going to lay the table?' Oliver called from the kitchen. Getting no answer, he appeared at the door, with a frying-pan in one hand and two kippers in the other. She looked at him in awe, and he smiled up the side of his face.

'Put that away,' he said, 'you can take it home with you.'

She watched his expert cooking with respect. After the meal, she started to clear away, but he pushed the table into a corner of the room and suggested that it was waste of time washing-up. He sat down opposite her and talked for half an hour on abstruse subjects. Then he read complicated poetry aloud. Iris listened, watching him, and wondering.

'Oliver,' she said suddenly, 'are all the things people say about you true?'

'What things, my dear child?'

'Well, the things you say about yourself, then.'

'What do I say about myself?'

She shifted in her chair and looked embarrassed.

'I mean, have you got dozens of women?'

'My dear Iris, what nonsense! In all the twenty-three years of my life I have not slept with more than nineteen women.'

'Nineteen?' she repeated in a small voice.

'Just so. I believe you only came here thinking you were coming into the jaws of a ruthless monster. What a little masochist you are!'

'I am not,' she said indignantly, wondering what the word meant. 'Anyway, we're cousins, you know.'

'What of it? You're still attractive, even if you are my cousin.'

He caught hold of her chair and drew it across the floor alongside the bed he was sitting on. He smiled to himself as he caught up her arm and kissed it in the crook, looking up into her face as he did so.

'Of course,' he said in his husky voice, 'I shouldn't really take advantage of a young girl like you in this fashion. It's disgraceful, isn't it?'

'Remember, the woman always controls the situation,' she replied with forced gaiety.

'What rubbish, Iris. I could seduce you in five minutes, or perhaps six. Would you like a five-pound bet on it?'

'No,' she said hastily, and added politely, 'Thank you.'

He took hold of her shoulders and drew her towards him, but she stiffened and jerked herself away.

'Come on, come on,' he said impatiently, 'turn your head round. Let yourself go. You've got some foolish ideas about modesty and how a woman should behave, I suppose.'

She did not answer, but thought deeply about the nineteen others. How had they reacted, and what had they said?

'Don't you like being kissed?'

'Why do you want to kiss me?' she asked, remembering some of Magda's advice and worldly lectures.

'Don't be inquisitive. Now, no more excuses.'

'All right,' she said resignedly, and submitted gingerly.

'Well, it wasn't so terrible, was it?' he asked.

Iris was not quite sure yet, so she asked again, feeling as though her voice was coming from another room, why he had kissed her.

'I like the taste of your lips. Strawberries and cream.'

'Oh.'

This was not at all like anything Magda had told her. She got up, wondering vaguely where her 'eg muscles had gone to, and slowly put on her coat. Oliver stood smoking a cigarette with his eyes screwed up, watching her with a flickering smile.

'What do you suppose the Mother Superior at your old school would say if she knew?'

Iris paused with powder puff in hand.

'I don't know,' she said at length.

'And all the nuns? What would they say?'

'I don't know either.'

Iris walked home feeling as though a new and exciting world had suddenly come into existence. Magda met her anxiously on the doorstep.

'Well?' she mouthed, drawing her inside and glancing round furtively to make sure they were alone. Iris took off her gloves and threw them casually on to a table.

'Well, what happened?' demanded the older girl.

Iris lit a cigarette with care, choked over the smoke and replied coolly:

'Nothing, of course.'

Magda's disappointment was acute.

'Nothing?'

'We read poetry.'

'All the time?'

'All the time.'

'Well!' Magda exclaimed in disgust. 'Well, I'll be damned!'

But it was not long before Iris broke down under the persistent cross-questioning from Magda every time she came back from seeing Oliver, and she confessed all, affecting a matter-of-fact air.

'Well,' said Magda doubtfully, 'I suppose he must at least be fond of you.'

Iris, who had not thought beyond the astounding fact of being kissable, was cheered by this charitable attitude.

'You realize, of course,' continued her sister heavily, 'that if you married him your children would turn out quite mad.'

'I see,' Iris said thoughtfully.

'But then we haven't got to that. The point is, what has he said?'

'Said?'

'Surely he doesn't just kiss you and say nothing?'

'Oh no. He usually says something funny.'

'Funny?' said Magda coldly, raising an eyebrow, 'he says something funny when he's *kissing* you?'

'Afterwards,' Iris explained, 'or sometimes before.'

Magda thought for a while in silence, looking at Iris with a piercing look that made her wish she could whistle a carefree sort of whistle or hum an easy sort of hum. But when she tried, nothing happened except a faint wheezing sound. At last Magda said ponderously:

'How does he kiss you?'

'Very well.'

'But how? I mean, does he kiss you with Passion?'

'I think so,' Iris said with rather less confidence.

'Long or short kisses?'

'Longish.'

'I see,' said Magda, and regarded her sister with a mixture of triumph and pity. 'I *see*,' she repeated darkly.

'What do you mean?'

'Just this. I don't think he's even fond of you. He merely likes kissing you.'

'Yes,' said Iris with modest pride. 'He does.'

'Well, what are you going to do?'

'Do?'

'Of course, idiot. This alters everything. For instance, you can't start off your letters to him "My dear Oliver", can you?'

'Can't I?'

'Certainly not. You must write "Oliver dear", that being the first step. Then we'll see what he writes in return. That will be a test. We'll see just what he means by these kisses. By the way,' she added, pausing at the door, 'what you see in him I don't know. He hasn't even got a beautiful mind.'

'But he has got a mind'

Magda gave a snort of derision.

'I suppose you fancy yourself as an Intellectual. Well, let's hope it's only a stage you're going through.'

The next letter from Oliver was, as usual, all about books and started off 'My dear Iris', seeing which, Magda said in rapid succession 'There you are', 'What did I say?' and 'I told you so'. But for the first time, Iris was immune from sarcasm, and knowing it might only be a passing phase of being unsquashable, she was determined to make the most of it.

Oliver and his younger brother often came down on Sundays to play tennis with Magda and her boy friend, Chris, who was a shy silent youth behind a pipe. Magda insisted, however, that he had depth, so there was nothing else to be said. Iris did not par-

take in the tennis party because she was not good enough, so she acted as ball-boy if her sister allowed her the privilege or just watched if she did not, and after supper Magda said 'You go and help Mummy wash-up because we are going to talk about Sex.'

On this occasion Iris raced through the piles of plates with a speed that mystified her mother, for she now considered herself qualified to discuss Sex too. Magda did not look too pleased when she came into the drawing-room, rather hot and shiny.

'Now that we're all here,' said Oliver, 'let's have a truth game.'

Iris was apprehensive at once. Oliver's truth games generally consisted of asking everyone whether they were virgins and then giving way to uncontrollable mirth. This one began on the usual lines. Oliver addressed Chris and asked him if he Had. Chris blushed, chewed his pipe, crossed his legs, uncrossed them again, and admitted that he had not, Magda swiftly pointing out that they happened to have principles. Oliver and his brother glanced at each other pityingly, and proceeded to challenge Chris's manhood. Magda got more and more angry, and retaliated with biting remarks which Oliver parried by slick references to Suburban Morality Codes and Home Chat Minds. Iris sat speechless with amazement, being sorry for everyone in turn. Oliver drew the incensed lovers into a subtle web in which they floundered helplessly.

'That's settled then,' said Oliver with satisfaction, 'I'll lend you my flat next week-end.'

'Where will *you* go?' Iris asked, visualizing her cousin pacing the Embankment all night out of sheer unselfishness.

'He wouldn't have any trouble about *that*,' said Magda scathingly, 'and we never said we'd definitely accept his offer. Now it's my turn to ask a question.' She paused and then said evenly, 'Oliver, do you lust after Iris?'

'I don't think . . .', Iris began quickly, feeling that she would die of shame if Oliver said No.

'Be quiet, Iris,' interrupted Oliver, 'I can manage this.'

He turned and faced Magda, smiling his twisted smile.

'Yes, I do.'

Magda smothered a gasp, and then looked fixedly at Iris. Had she said *There You Are* forty-nine times, *I Told You So* eighty-two times and *What Did I Say* one hundred and twelve times, she could not have conveyed more. But Iris noticed nothing. She was miles away, though outwardly she was trying to look suitably shocked.

'We ought to be going,' said Oliver briskly, and they went outside into the drive, while Oliver's brother started up the car. Iris was silent, drinking in the intensified beauty of the night and the suddenly intoxicating scents of earth and trees. Oliver's husky voice melted into her magic.

'I suppose you won't have the courage to come and see me now,' he said leaning out of the car.

'I suppose you won't have the courage to ask me.'

'Next Tuesday, then.'

The car purred away into the distance. Magda and Chris wandered off to say good night tenderly, and Iris walked slowly into the house. On the doorstep she glanced over her shoulder and saw her sister silhouetted at the gate, her face turned upwards. Men may fall madly in love with Magda, she told herself, and as she has so often impressed upon me, I am too unattractive and cold-natured for that. But, at least, I am desired. She drew a deep breath, and started climbing upstairs to her room. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking dreamily out at the stars.

'This has been a very wonderful day,' she thought. 'I may still get those twenty children, after all. Where there's sex there's hope.'

Tooth and Nail

He was Uncle Sidney's friend. When Iris came to London to study music, Uncle Sidney said: You must go to a good dentist. I know the very man. Great friend of mine, and a hell of a nice chap, with an astounding repertoire of jokes. Can't think how he remembers them all.

That was how she came to meet Mr Grimble. He was a queer little man to look at. His face was long and pasty, with small pale eyes and puffy lips. He was charm personified when Iris went to him the first time. He had a soothing way of speaking; he talked earnestly about Beethoven; he sang comic songs; he showed her his poetry.

Iris was pleased, because teeth were essential for playing the flute, which was what she wanted to do most of all. He was a brilliant dentist, too. Uncle Sidney said so, emphatically. Mr Grimble said so, even more emphatically. He was a genius; an artist; and she should be proud to be his patient. By her second visit, he was well away with the naughty stories. They chugged out of his mouth in an oily stream, whilst Iris laughed politely when she was able, and spluttered politely when she was not.

All went well until one day Mr Grimble hurt her with the drill, in the middle of a dialect story about two farmers. Iris jumped, and then smiled apologetically. But his outward personality had changed completely. The merry twinkle, the bantering smile, the caressing voice, were all replaced by something hard and threatening. From that moment, he ceased reciting his verses aloud in moving tones, or telling stories in funny voices. He talked solely about his amorous adventures, while Iris wriggled farther and farther away from the menacing drill. Because, you see, when Mr Grimble got to the details, he became careless.

Week after week, he joyously drilled the same tooth bigger and bigger, putting in temporary stoppings and digging them out again, until for Iris it was one long thrusting pain. Besides, he

was spoiling the César Franck symphony. They were doing it that term, and she came to the dentist after orchestral rehearsals, feeling full of it. The more she jumped or cried out, the angrier Mr Grimble got, insisting that there was no pain at all, and saying that she was just being a coward. She could hardly contradict a genius, and anyway, when Mr Grimble shouted, it worried her more than the pain, so it was best to say 'Yes', 'Sorry', and 'I see'.

'Like melons, they were,' said Mr Grimble, passing his tongue rapidly over his lips like a lizard, and poising ecstatically with the drill in his hand. 'So I wrote a poem to this waitress, on the back of the menu, and left it on the table. Gave the poor girl a thrill, I suppose. Brightened up her sordid little life.'

'Well?' Iris said dutifully, through cylinders of cotton wool, 'what then?'

'What then?' repeated Mr Grimble in horror, 'my dear child, I only have affairs with women in my own class. Damn! Must you jerk away like that? No regard for *me*, of course.'

'Sorry,' Iris muttered, looking fixedly at her knees and quelling them into quiescence.

'No guts at all,' sizzled Mr Grimble, 'how do you imagine you're going to get through life?'

'I don't know,' Iris gasped, swooshing pink water round the aching void. 'I don't know at all.'

Mr Grimble threw a handful of instruments into the boiling cauldron, paused to pat the drill affectionately, and then came back to her side.

'You know,' he said, sitting on the arm of the chair, stroking his thighs with plump little hands, 'I have to admit - it excites me to cause pain. Yes, there's something powerful, something exhilarating about it.'

'It doesn't excite *me*,' Iris pointed out gently, standing up with legs that had mislaid their knees.

'No? Interesting.' He stared at her with spikes in his eyes, as he always did when drilling.

He put her coat on for her, and locked his arms round her breasts.

'All the same,' he purred, 'since you feel pain so deeply, it follows that you also feel pleasure deeply.'

'I don't know,' stammered the girl, groping for her music case with her one free arm.

'Don't you? Oh yes, I see. So young, so sweet. But don't you want to know?'

'No. I mean, I *do* know. Yes, I feel music very deeply.'

He laughed in his throat, pressing her closer to him, and grunting once or twice. She could not move, or speak. She wanted to snub him, but then, it was so awful being snubbed.

'You're afraid of me,' he said eagerly, sliding round her body to face her.

'No, I'm not,' she managed to say breathlessly.

'You *are* afraid of me,' he insisted crossly.

His face drew near to hers. She saw the white flabby cheeks, the pale eyes glinting into hers, the puffy mouth shiny with damp. The pallid whole blurred with closeness, and then there was a tap on the door. Mr Grimble released her quickly, and the man Jones was there, with his half-shut eyes in an inscrutable face, announcing the next patient.

'What a nice face Jones has,' Iris thought as she followed him to the door and said good-bye. He said:

'Good afternoon, miss,' which somehow depressed her.

Iris decided to ask Uncle Sidney to come with her next time. She couldn't tell him that Mr Grimble tried to make love to her, because he would surely say: 'Why do you let him?' and she couldn't explain. Once, she had confided in her sister.

'Why don't you tell him to go to hell?' was the prompt answer, 'you're so feeble. So beastly feeble.'

But one couldn't. It wasn't done. Besides, people were so sensitive. And supposing she did tell Mr Grimble to go to hell, why, he'd tell Uncle Sidney who'd tell her mother, and Granny would probably get to hear of it too. Still, Uncle Sidney would see what was going on, and at least Mr Grimble wouldn't dare to lose his temper this time.

The little dentist greeted them with an amused leer.

‘Ah,’ he said in his silky voice, ‘I rather expected you to bring your uncle with you.’

Iris, blushing guiltily, took off her coat and propped her music case against the wall, while Uncle Sidney and Mr Grimble talked about Russia and the Lower Orders. She sat down resignedly, watching the dentist pick out a fat needle and screw it lovingly into the drill. She saw it dangling over her head. Mr. Grimble had said brutally: ‘When I see sweat on your upper lip, I know you’re afraid.’ So she had put on a lot of powder to soak it up, so that he wouldn’t see. This gave her confidence, and she thought:

‘I mustn’t let my knees shake, or he’ll sneer at me. I mustn’t think about it, or it will happen, and then the more I try to stop it, the worse it will get. I’ll put my hands firmly on my knees and then neither will tremble.’

Uncle Sidney was saying:

‘That’s just it, old man. You can’t trust the bounders. They don’t know the meaning of the word honour.’

Old man was saying:

‘Well, of course, they wiped out their own upper class, so what’s left? Riff-raff. Rabble. Naturally one can’t trust a country ruled by peasants. Pah!’

Uncle Sidney said:

‘Poo!’

As soon as the drill touched the bottomless pit, Iris jumped.

‘There you are!’ barked Mr Grimble triumphantly. ‘See that? She won’t let me get near her. Shee. imagination.’

He and Uncle Sidney nodded understandingly over the girl’s head, and with growing despair she watched the significant glances between the two men every time she moved a fraction of an inch.

‘Mind you,’ said Uncle Sidney profoundly, ‘musicians are highly emotional, old boy.’

‘Ah yes,’ crooned Old Boy in his castor-oil voice, selecting another needle, with his tongue quivering just outside his lips, ‘hypersensitive creatures, musicians.’

‘Must take that into consideration,’ rejoined Uncle Sidney, and began talking about golf.

He took Iris out to tea afterwards, and gave her a very long lecture on self-discipline and control. Iris was terribly humbled, so to cheer her up, Uncle Sidney recounted a few of the juiciest of his amours, leaving no doubt as to his amazing virility, stroking her knee under the table the while, by way of accompaniment.

She began to have dreams. Sometimes they were nightmares of having no teeth at all, and standing on a concert platform before a hushed audience, trying to play the flute, with no noise coming. Sometimes, she just dreamed of teeth; huge teeth in a cavernous mouth, and she was walking about inside it on a colossal plushy tongue. All the enormous teeth had enormous holes, which were filled with thick nails, dug deep down into the roots. All the time, in the background, there would be the César Franck symphony, swelling and receding, ominous and terrible. Pairs of disembodied crinkled hands came at her out of blackness. She would wake from these dreams bathed in sweat, put on the light, and whisk her tongue round her teeth to make sure they were all there, with no nails in them.

After a few more visits to Mr Grimble, which seemed eternity, he announced regretfully that the tooth would have to come out.

‘You see,’ he explained wearily, ‘you’ve made it quite impossible for me, so you’ll have to have it out. There’s nothing else for it.’

‘I suppose not,’ Iris said, trying to look disappointed.

‘I hope there won’t be any nonsense about having gas.’

‘None at all,’ promised Iris, spreading a large smile by mistake.

The next day, she was sitting in the waiting-room, thinking how odd it was to feel excited about an extraction. Looking idly at the magazines on the long polished table, she decided that she didn’t understand Mr Grimble.

‘He’s over-sexed,’ she mused, ‘that’s glands. I should be sorry for him. . . . He said it excited him to hurt me. . . . That’s like a sadist.’

The magazine dropped from her hands, slithered over her

knees, and swished to the ground. Of course! Why hadn't she tumbled to it before? He was a sadist, and sadists went to all sorts of lengths. He might. . . . No, perhaps not . . . but he easily might . . . She got up and paced the room, thinking. Supposing he took out all her teeth, like in the dream, only without the relief of waking up. Horror! Never to play the flute again. But why hadn't Uncle Sidney seen what was going on? Yes, they were in league together. Plotting something. Those furtive little glances between them, and the lecture afterwards 'to allay suspicion. But where was it all leading? What? Why? Think. *Think*. . . My God! That was it! She'd heard about such things. They were struck off the register for it. Had Mr Grimble not hinted as much? ('Of course, you notice I don't employ a nurse. Cramps one's style, you know. Ha! Ha!')

'But if one is unconscious, one wouldn't know,' she thought desperately, 'they could do it, and how could one tell? No proof. Oh, how vile! How ghastly! And he said, only women in his own class. If only I were a waitress.'

She snatched up her music case, rushed to the door, and flung it open. Jones stood there, like the brass chords in the symphony, dark and foreboding.

'Mr Grimble is ready for you.'

His voice was sinister. His face was a mask, the half-closed eyes were dull and cruel.

'Ready for me!' she thought wildly, preceding him down the passage, 'I can imagine it. I'll bet he is. And Jones is in it too - waiting outside all that time, in case I tried to escape. But I'll show them I'm not afraid. . . .' She shook hands brightly with the doctor, who was just getting to the point of a screamingly funny joke, 'he's in it, of course—the doctor. Perhaps they both—but there wouldn't be time, surely. They must take it in turns . . . mask over my face . . . Mr Grimble hovering in front of me . . . I know what's going to happen, and I'm still not afraid . . . filthy swine . . . might have a child . . . deformed . . . no legs . . . or three eyes . . . I wonder whose turn . . . but I won't . . . show . . . them . . .'

Mr Grimble's face receded farther and farther away. The voices got fainter and high-pitched. She heard him say in a squeaky voice to the doctor:

'Musicians, you know. Over-emotional, and all that.'

They laughed, very faintly, Waves of tinny fanatical laughter. . . . She was back in the waiting-room, trying to find the way out. It was dark, and she felt all round the walls for the door. Suddenly, there were lots of doors, and as she opened each one in turn, Jones stood there, but a much bigger Jones, who reached up to the ceiling. 'Mr Grimble is ready for you. Mr Grimble is ready for you.' A hollow voice chanting over and over again, echoing tonelessly, and getting deeper, slower, like a gramophone running down. More faint laughter, coming nearer, and louder . . .

'That was a good one,' the doctor was saying, 'new one on me. Ha! Ha! Damn funny.'

Mr Grimble's face came back in waves, like a reflection in water.

'Stop that!' he said harshly, 'you're all right.'

She realized she was crying. Tears splashed tepidly on to her hands cupped up to her face. Ashamed and muddled, she took a deep breath and grasped the glass he was holding out to her.

'I feel sick,' she murmured.

'Oh, rubbish!' snapped Mr Grimble, 'a little whiff of gas, and you feel sick! Here's your coat.'

He pushed the music case into her hand, and bundled her out of the room, led her along the passage, and put her outside the door.

She leant against the railings, trying to regain sense of time and space. She circled her tongue round cautiously. 'They're all there, except the one. I shall still be able to play the flute, whatever else has happened.' Her vision was still blurred, and noises were exaggerated. People passed by her with thunderous footsteps. She began walking slowly, making for the nearest underground. Cars screamed at her, their bonnets transformed into wide-open mouths. People bellowed in her ears, and fragments of conversation echoed, loud then soft, soft then loud. 'Of course, if you really want to look towny . . . TO LOOK TOWNY . . . to look towny . . . ' He was only saying this morning . . . SAYING THIS

MORNING . . . this morning . . . 'Albert won't touch it fried . . . TOUCH IT FRIED . . . touch it fried . . .' Buildings towered over her like the giant teeth in her dreams; a workman outside a shop was hammering nails. Bang! Bang! She could feel the pain as they were driven in. She passed a window full of yawning shoes. A-a-a-h! they groaned. Down in the underground, her pennies dropped into the machine explosively. The station platform was the dark room without any doors, and a syrupy melody from the symphony pounded in her mind. Then all the exits filled up with gigantic Joneses, with half-closed eyes in cruel faces.

'Mr Grimble is ready for you. Mr Grimble is ready for you . . .'

She collapsed on to a bench, burying her face in her hands. Her mouth was full of blood, and she felt warm gushes from where the tooth had been. The music swelled to a tremendous volume, gathering in on her like a huge blanket of sound, and the bells of the brass instruments came swaying up to her ears, ten times their normal size.

'I shall never get over the shame of this,' she thought, shaking with sobs, 'in public, and people staring, and if they ask me why, what shall I say? I've had a tooth out. It's so silly and babyish, but I must cry. I can't help it. Perhaps I'm going mad. Perhaps there really wasn't ever any pain.'

A porter came up and put his grizzly face close to hers.

'What's up, dearie?' he said. He placed an arm round her shoulder, and his voice was so kind that she wept still more, holding tightly on to his coat, which had a comforting smell. People stood and looked at her, their faces registering astonishment and distaste at such uncontrol. Her thoughts came with her sobs, in little jerks and rushes:

'Why can't I stop? They'll think it's cowardice - but I wasn't a coward - nobody could call me that - I didn't care whose turn it was - only he should've let me cry afterwards - even men sometimes do after an anaesthetic - and he's ruined the César Franck symphony - he didn't play the game - and some day - I shall jolly well tell Mummy - and Uncle Sidney - and Granny too, if necessary - that Mr Grimble is - no Gentleman.'

Living

Colonel Stewart came pounding along the passage, making a whirring noise to himself. He opened his younger daughter's door, and no one could create more commotion than the Colonel. Crossing to the window, he knocked 'into a chair, stumbled over some things on the floor, slammed the window, and threw back the curtains with such gusto that the whole arrangement fell to the floor with a crash. Then he tiptoed to his daughter's bedside, hit her smartly on the shoulder, and lowering his head, bawled:

'Are you awake?'

'I think so,' Iris said sarcastically.

'Bathroom's empty.'

He lingered at the door.

'Must wash, you know,' he said fervently.

She raised herself on one elbow, and glared, but he had gone out, whirring again.

The heaviness settled on her chest, as it always did, first thing in the morning. Properly awake, she levered it up painfully, and put on a compulsory record in her mind.

'I am a music student,' it droned, 'student days are the happiest in your life; everyone says so; therefore, please note, when you are an old, old lady with a wobbly head and shaky hands, you'll walk down that road, and hear the clotted clumps of sounds coming from the school of music, and they'll open up a Pandora's box of beautiful memories, and you'll "Ah" to yourself, and wipe away a tear, because student days are . . .'

It was hard to concentrate with Great-Uncle James practising French vowels in the next room. Short, jagged grunts punctuated her thoughts in the wrong places. Why ever did he persist? Dash it, he'd lived in France for twenty years, but the people wouldn't let you learn the lingo, he explained. Now that he had settled in England he had decided to study it seriously.

'Ugh! U-u-u! Eu! Oo-oo-oo!!'

Iris pictured him, huddling in bed with the quilt wrapped round him up to his ears; his cotton-wool hair fluffing on top; his eyes peering over his specs, chin pushed into his neck, textbook balanced on hunched knees.

‘Ong! Oar! Or-r-r!’

He was fairly bellowing it out! Now, where had she got to . . . yes, happiest time of your life . . . jollity, and things. . . And today, she told herself, dragging on her dressing-gown, you’re going to have another lovely flute lesson! But the pangs of apprehension could not be danced away so easily. She padded off to the bathroom, where Philip was sitting on the bathroom stool, reading a book, while the hot tap ran noisily into the basin.

‘Hullo,’ said his sister, admiring his solution of the tiresome business, ‘have you finished?’

‘Yes,’ murmured the boy, flipping over a page without looking up, ‘carry on.’

Iris turned off the hot tap, paused, and turned on the cold. She made some dabbling effects with her finger-tips, and then stared out of the window. Philip slapped the book together, jerked back his front hair, and slithered out. After a few minutes’ reflection, Iris made washing sounds in the basin with a toothbrush, and returned to her room to dress.

‘That’s partly the trouble,’ she justified herself, ‘too clean, all the time. One never feels oneself.’

Great-Uncle James mumbled, cleared his throat industriously, and promoted himself to lesson four.

Iris put on her clothes as carelessly as possible, hoping to achieve a Bohemian effect. But they were the wrong sort of clothes. She examined the finished result in the long mirror, which screamed at her:

‘Oh, *lord!* Too ladylike! Just too ladylike for words!’

She turned away sadly, re-living her flute lesson last week.

Mr Penrose had his usual hangover. He slumped greenly in a chair with his eyelids folded half-way down his eyes, chain-smoking dejectedly. She had played through the same piece three times, and was about to start it again, when Mr Penrose hunched

his shoulders, pressed hard on his knees, and brought himself to his feet with a few loud clicks. He came and stood behind her, and they both looked enquiringly at the music stand.

'Yes, yes, m'dear,' he said morosely, 'very good. Great improvement. Trouble is, you're so young. You haven't *lived*.'

He clapped his knobbly hands obligingly over her breasts.

'Of course,' he continued, his breath coming in long and short puffs on her neck, like Morse, 'when you've had a few lovers, you'll begin to *play* the flute.'

She watched his fingers creeping towards her waist. Her corsets ended there in a sort of ruffle, which somehow made her feel a fool.

'You see,' he blew two shorts, 'it's too refined. Ah! That's it, m'dear! It's too ladylike!'

The words seemed to rise grittily from the orange finger-tips pummelling and pressing.

'And then,' he sighed, 'a couple of Scotches, and you can face any cadenza.'

He moistened his lips, and gazed wistfully at the clock on the other side of the road.

'How many is "a few" lovers?' she had asked anxiously, and he had looked at her with cobra eyes and his underlip quivering as if he was going to cry. He was going to kiss her again. The fleshy, whiskied mouth revolted her, but she didn't know how to stop him, without appearing rude and ungrateful for all the trouble he took over her lessons. Then the next pupil came in, so Mr Penrose jumped away and started shuffling intently through sheets of music.

She had crept into the common room, and sat in a corner, listening to the students talking.

'Her tone is appalling. . . .' 'And the way he slides!' 'Technique isn't bad, but hasn't the first idea about interpretation. . . .' '... Just a poor imitator of Sargent. . . .' 'Oh well, Sibelius is only a poor imitator of Tschaikowsky. . . .'

Iris thought how future students would speak of her.

'Iris Stewart? That *frightful* flautist? My *dear*, she's too horribly ladylike!'

But there was no hope of even getting to the stage of being discussed. Mr Penrose had said so, or he might as well have done. What chance had she of Living? How did one set about having lovers? And did he mean two, or as many as six? If only he realized how important it was. She *had* to play the flute. . . .

Her elder sister Magda burst in on her reverie, and said edgily:

'What on earth are you doing? We've finished breakfast ages ago. Your bacon's ruined, and a jolly good job too!'

'Sorry.'

Magda was carrying Uncle James's breakfast tray. She put it down on the bed, and ostentatiously produced a letter from her pocket.

'From Chris?' asked Iris, knowing it was expected of her

'Mind your own business!' snapped Magda, as usual, and went on hurriedly, 'he says my breasts are perfect. Yours are too floppy.'

She dealt them such a withering glance that Iris could have sworn they dropped another inch, out of sheer mortification.

'A couple of babies or so, and they'll be on a level with your navel. Actually, mine will be just right. . . .'

Iris nodded wretchedly.

'What do Mummy and Daddy say about Chris, Iris?'

Iris hesitated. You had to be careful what you said to Magda. She remembered Mummy saying cautiously:

'Of course, he's quite a nice boy. . . . but not really what you'd call. . . . or rather, not exactly in the same. . . .'

And Uncle James contributed a set of fluky half sentences:

'You couldn't say he was. On the other hand, and after all perhaps one shouldn't, although it is terribly important that.'

Then Daddy had growled:

'The boy's not a gentleman,' and the other two had looked grateful, 'I asked Magda who his parents were, and she said she'd forgotten to ask but would ring him up. Damnably rude, that girl.'

So Mummy had said quickly that Magda was highly strung.

'They haven't said anything to me,' Iris started rapidly, 'beyond

the usual things, like saying he's good-looking and a reserved type.'

'What else?' pursued Magda doggedly. When she was in that mood, it was useless trying to hide anything.

'Well, they did say, casually, that he isn't out of the top drawer. Not quite. They said nothing against the second-from-the-top—'

Magda went scarlet, and her eyes blazed.

'Well, I'm damned! Fat lot *they* know! Nobody understands, but one doesn't expect *that* . . .'

She stalked out with the tray. As she neared Uncle James's door, the vowels ceased abruptly, and were replaced by scuffling and thudding. When one of the girls came in, he liked to be standing out of bed with his pyjama window open.

Magda said Good morning Uncle James, without glancing at him, and he slunk disappointedly back to bed. She set down the tray, and smiled patronizingly at the naturist magazines which Uncle James had forgotten to hide under the mattress. He talked about the body beautiful, while Magda fidgeted impatiently.

'Sit down,' he invited, patting a patch, and then he curled his knees round her back and continued, with sentences like puffs of smoke.

'It's so wonderful, nature . . . so pure . . . but people's minds, don't you know . . . spoils . . . and then, this modesty nonsense . . . criminal . . . hiding everything . . . and that's the whole trouble . . .'

He snuggled nearer. Magda's back stiffened, and she held her head primly.

'Poor old buffer,' she was thinking, 'absolutely impotent, really. Couldn't even consummate his own marriage, and with both his brothers trying to do it for him. Chris is virile . . .'

Mrs Stewart opened the door, a dustpan in her hand. She gave Uncle James one look, and removed Magda with herself.

The door closed firmly, righteously, and Uncle James brooded.

'It's their minds. Their awful minds. Everything beautiful is made filthy.'

He pushed the magazines into their hiding place, and picked up the French grammar. His voice rang out clear and resonant. 'Ugh! Eu! Ai! Ae!'

Iris hurried down to the nursery, where she found Philip gazing into a home-made ants' nest in a cardboard box. She sat down, feeling too depressed to eat.

'Have you any spots I could squeeze for you?' she asked hopefully.

Philip fingered his face absently.

'It doesn't seem so. I think I can promise you one in a day or two. No actual signs, but I have a feeling inside me.'

'That's good. Would you like me to wash your hair?'

'You did it yesterday, ass!'

She knew she ought to be practising, but there seemed no point, now that she knew what was holding her back. And to think how she had bungled that heaven-sent opportunity the day before yesterday!

The Colonel came in and threw open the window, inhaling noisily as he did so.

'Fresh air,' he muttered reverently, eyeing his children.

'My spider that I've been fattening up is positively man-eating now,' grinned Philip, 'like to have a peep, Iris?'

Iris nodded enthusiastically, repressed a shudder, and bent her head over the jam jar with eyes tight shut.

'Remarkable,' she breathed.

'Yes,' said Philip with modest pride, 'just put your finger inside and see how he'll attack it - oh, listen!'

Uncle James had dressed. As soon as he was up and about, he whistled, and it was always the same tuneless tune. He started on one note, went down four staccato ones, back to the first note, and repeated this section several times as if stuck in a groove. He then whistled down the whole scale and back, finishing up with an arpeggio. It went on all day, except when he was talking. Mrs Stewart said:

'I do think he shouldn't whistle in the lavatory. Everyone knows where he is.'

He tucked his magazines under the mattress, pummelled a rhythm on his chest for a bit, and trotted jauntily downstairs, wagging his head, and whistling with pursed lips. Philip joined in from the nursery, and when Uncle James opened the door, they both did the arpeggio together.

'Well, well! Hulloo, hulloo, hulloo! Lovely morning if it'd stop . . . What is everyone doing on this glorious? Ah, Philip, not following in the family . . . Not choosing an Army. . . ?

'I am going to be an entomologist,' mumbled the boy, tenderly helping an ant over an obstacle.

'There's no money in ants,' remarked the Colonel gloomily.

'None at all!' bubbled Uncle James.

'There are jobs which bring one in five hundred a year,' retorted Philip shortly.

'Five hundred a year!' growled his father contemptuously.

'Five hundred a year!' echoed Uncle James, with a tinkle of soprano laughter. He stood in front of the fire on one leg, lifted the other upwards with bent knee, and waggled its foot. Then he did the same with the other leg. The Colonel watched distastefully . . .

'Wreck of a man . . . Soft . . . Flabby . . . No verbs in his sentences . . . Like to see him do some press-ups! Tcha!'

Iris was thinking wistfully about the medical students' dance the night before last. Mummy had booked a room for her in an hotel, in case she missed the last train. She blushed guiltily to herself, remembering how she had never used that room at all. A trickle of optimism filtered through the grey thoughts. Perhaps it hadn't been wasted after all . . . Perhaps she was, at this very moment, a new and emancipated woman. . . . She dwelt deliciously on the dark, musty-smelling staircase . . . being led up four flights, with her hand held behind his back . . . how daring and adventurous she had felt then . . . how solemn it all was . . . how she'd wanted to giggle!

Magda's crisp voice broke in on the shadowy thoughts.

'When exactly are you going to clean your room? I'm waiting to do the landing.'

‘Sorry.’

‘And another thing,’ Magda went on, ‘Chris says there is passion in my make-up.’

‘But you don’t wear any,’ Iris exclaimed in surprise, ‘except powder, of course.’ She scrutinized her sister’s face for signs.

‘Don’t be more of a fool than you can help,’ retorted Magda tartly, ‘and anyway, you haven’t any at all.’

Iris’s optimism vanished in a streak. She collected a dustpan and brush and went up to her room. As if things weren’t bad enough already! To think of the humiliation . . . turned down on the grounds of virginity. . . . She would never live it down. . . . And anyhow, if that was the case, how ever did one *start* getting unladylike? No passion in her playing, m’dear . . . so *cold*, don’t you know . . .

Magda followed her in, and shut the door with a purposeful and conspiratorial air.

‘Now,’ she said briskly, ‘about that dance. I haven’t had a chance to get you alone before.’

‘Well?’ Iris said coldly, aware that she had pinched Magda’s next utterance.

‘Are you still a virgin?’

‘Oh, of course I am!’ Iris snapped resentfully.

Magda bristled at once.

‘Keep your hair on, dear! Everyone thinks you’re so sweet. Hmph! Little do they know! I simply ask any ordinary question, and you fly off the handle at me. And one would think I’d hit the nail on the head.’

‘And supposing you had? What then?’

‘I should be absolutely disgusted,’ Magda replied acidly, ‘not that it would surprise me in the least, though I must say, Chris and I have Ideals. We are keeping ourselves pure for one another. We are—’ she broke off suddenly, and goggled at her sister, ‘Why? *Aren’t* you?’

‘Yes. Very.’ Iris laughed mirthlessly.

‘Oh,’ murmured Magda flatly, and blinked disappointedly a few times.

‘Well, anyhow,’ she said, ‘don’t be afraid to let me know, any time at all. You can trust Chris and me completely.’

Left to herself, Iris wielded the broom viciously, jabbing the startled furniture, and sending surprised shoes skidding across the floor.

‘All the same,’ she thought, brightening suddenly, ‘it *was* an unusual experience. Gosh, if any of the family so much as *dreamed* . . . Yes, from their angle it was Experience in a big way . . . After all, I did actually undress . . . but my goose-pimples put me off . . . I couldn’t think of anything except semolina . . . and one feels so silly without clothes on . . . even so, it might have worked if it hadn’t been for my tummy . . . it’s never rumbled so loudly before . . . so persistently . . . naturally, we both ignored it politely . . . the longer the drum rolls the more we pretended we were stone deaf . . . yes, it was enough to damp any man’s desire. Well, they call it “sleeping together”, which is exactly what we did – when I’d got used to his frightful snoring . . .’

‘Well,’ she thought excitedly, leaving a small pool of dust on the dressing-table to console herself, ‘it may have done the trick after all. It probably takes a day or so to come into force. I must have shed my repressions like so many potato peelings. I do believe I *feel* purged!’

She rushed downstairs and fitted her flute together with trembling hands. She started playing, hardly daring to hear herself. It *was* different. She could swear that it was coming out in liquid form instead of in lumps. The short notes were no longer pinheads in mist. They were swelling into creamy rounds. She felt a great peace steal over her.

‘I am going to be a real musician. . . . It’s going to be all right now . . .’

She played on with a confidence she had never felt until now . . .

‘Lunch nearly ready,’ gruffed the Colonel, peering round the door, ‘must wash hands before a meal.’

Iris joined Philip in the bathroom, where they turned on both taps, and watched in silence the steam jetting upwards, and the bubbles forming and cracking in the basin.

'Lunch is almost in,' the Colonel told Uncle James, 'if you want to wash.'

Uncle James went out of the house with quick staccato steps, like his whistling. He placed his hat carefully on his forehead, to preserve his thick wad of hair. Then he proceeded to the bottom of the garden to chop wood, tweeting cheerily as he did so. This always happened when meals were announced. Mrs Stewart said she would go mad if he did it once more.

As soon as the meal was over, Philip disappeared in the direction of the rockery, to see how his war was getting on. He had organized it between the red and black ants, and was thinking of throwing in some gingery ones to see what would happen. He waved vaguely to Iris as she sped out of the front gate to catch the train to London.

She hurried down the road, swinging her music case lightly. All the way to London she felt she was floating along on a fluff. When she neared the school of music, she heard the clumps of sounds quite differently - no longer as warning, mocking voices. They were exhilarating now. She listened, entranced. A soprano pierced through the thickness like a yellow streak, and was swallowed in a sheet of flame from a trumpet; both were engulfed by an organ thundering in purples and bronze; the whole mass swayed and surged, peaked here and there by convulsive spasms; intermittent blot from a clarinet, a trickle of wide-eyed sounds on a harp; a ripple of flute; little white notes winged in and out of the wad, trembling above, submerging, then murmuring below . . .

She marched authoritatively into the common room, and nodded condescendingly at the other students. She announced that she had never heard anything so pitiful as so-and-so's Beethoven last night. Immediately, all eyes swelled on her, bulging with interest, and respect. At last, it was Accepted!

Her lesson time couldn't come quick enough. She hastened off down the corridor, pausing to encourage two students listening outside the practice rooms and making derisive faces at each other. And to think that she had never been able to use those rooms for

that very reason! She was so lightheaded with joy that her thoughts came rollicking and tumbling in a delirious sort of ramble. . . .

'I am part of a noise which means something important . . . I am a colour shredding in and out of a vivid blaze of chords which breathe . . . I am a sound with a curly nose and one revolving eye which darts from end to end of a geometrical forehead . . . I am a chord that keeps changing shape and the mouth spins round and round with orange and green fingers spiking out of it and zig-zagging spirally upwards . . . I am a celluloid ball spinning on top of a jet of water . . . I am a ball of wool unwinding and unwinding and unwinding . . .'

They had started tea when she arrived home. Uncle James was saying to Mrs Stewart:

'It says so in the schools broadcast. You can't get the proper accent unless you arrange your mouth in the – like this,' he licked his lips and pushed them out an inch from his face.

'I see.'

'Iris, did you come in by the back door?' asked her father.

'I forget, really. Yes, perhaps I did.'

'Never come in by the back door. Always the front . . .'

'I dug up some super *Formica Fusca* species in the garden,' whispered Philip, 'they're in the nursery in a jam jar; earth and stones as well, to make them feel at home. Shall I show you after tea?'

'Please do,' Iris replied quietly.

She sat quite still, forcing bread and butter down without the aid of saliva. She tried to appear aware of the chips of conversation that blew her way, but she was curiously dead inside. She felt she would never react to anything ever again.

'But if you put your lips *this* way,' frothed Uncle James, sneering horribly, 'you can't possibly make the correct, and the wireless said most people haven't, and yet I knew instinctively. . . .'

He brushed some crumbs from his knees and trotted to the

fireplace. He stood on one leg and waggled the other. Nearly time to go to his evening class at the polytechnic. He knew what *they* thought. They thought he only went to see the young girls. Oh, their *minds*!

'These common swine,' said the Colonel with loathing, 'can't trust the blackguards. Dishonest, every one of 'em. . . .'

'Have some more tea, dear . . .'

'Chris lights two cigarettes and hands one to me . . .'

Uncle James thrust out his mouth and began whistling; down the scale, and up again. He put his hat gently on top of his head, well forward – none of his brothers still boasted a crop of hair like his. He walked briskly out of the house with tiny steps, swinging his arms and tweeting his tune. A French grammar and an exercise book were in his coat pocket. He patted them contentedly and tripped on.

'Or, I know what they think. They think I don't go to the classes at all! They think . . . Oh, *disgusting*!'

When nobody was looking, he did a merry little skip into the air, as he rounded the corner to the polytechnic.

Iris smoked a cigarette by the fire. Prim little voices squeaked at her out of pursed mouths:

'Failure! Wash-out! Oh dear, so ladylike!'

She remembered dully, cynically, how she had imagined she was playing the Handel sonata . . . The silky notes trickling out . . . graceful, undulating shapes forming and fading . . .

She had sensed Mr Penrose's heavy eyes roving dejectedly up and down her body. He pruned himself reluctantly out of his vision of double Scotchies ranged along the length of Iris's flute.

'Yes, yes, m'dear . . . ' exploring the ceiling as if inspiration would be splashed on it in giant capitals, 'very good . . . great improvement . . .'

The cobra eyes suddenly lit up, if they had spotted the answer dangling from the cobweb in the far corner. He padded across the room, and coiled an arm round Iris's waist. A puff of whiskied breath wafted past her nostrils.

'What I admire most about you, Iris,' he had said earnestly, and

she held her breath. She had felt quite faint with emotion. It was coming . . . her sensuous tone . . . the passion, the absolute *abandon* in her playing . . .

‘—is your legs.’

Iris suddenly realized her mother was watching her. With a lurch of panic, she raised her eyes. What had her face betrayed? What was she going to be asked?

Mrs Stewart smiled her dreamy, comfy smile.

‘I don’t think Uncle James will ever learn French, do you?’ she said.

The Beast of Battersea

Iris sat in a corner of the railway carriage, listening to the other members of the orchestra chattering and laughing. She longed to gather up the crumbs of experience which fell from their lips, making them so carefree and confident. This was her first job: second flute in a symphony orchestra. For years she had dreamed of this, worked for it. All her loneliness would peel off like an old skin. She would be among friends, thinking as she thought, loving music as she loved it. Musicians – real, professional musicians – must be the happiest people in the world.

But it was all quite different. Now, after a month of touring, she felt like flat soda water. Everybody was too used to music. They groaned at Beethoven and Tschaiikowsky. So she had to roll up her excitement into a tight little ball inside her, and keep it secretly, ashamedly.

It was Freddy Pringle, the conductor, who had crucified it. He was a Fascist, and proud of it, in spite of the war. He said he looked forward to the day when he would be known as the Beast of Battersea. He was quite certain his chance would come. And how he gloated over Dunkirk!

He would stand on the rostrum, pressing his puny legs together, clutching his lapels with claw-like hands; the unhealthy grey of his face flushed a dirty pink; the large loose-lipped mouth twisted and sneered; the faded little eyes glinted palely behind glass; and the short abrupt nose, with its dilating nostrils, seemed hardly large enough to balance his spectacles. He shouted and screamed at rehearsals, his high voice crackling like dry twigs; clawing himself, and crouching with knees squeezed tightly together; working himself up into a frenzy of rage. Then Iris saw him, not behind a music stand, but on a balcony, screeching his intuitions to a cheering mob.

The orchestra would regard him with cold, expressionless faces for a while, until some incensed bass player growled behind his

instrument; then a restless murmuring would spread through the strings; an angry twittering come from the woodwind; and the brass would stride in with loud braying in brightly coloured language. Funnily enough, Freddy's only allies in the party were the Jews. They would stand up and restore order with reproachful words. They were always with Freddy, in hotels and on trains, clustered round him like a bodyguard, shielding him from the hatred of the Gentiles. This convinced Iris that Freddy intended being beastly to everyone *except* the Jews, who were such good musicians.

The daily rows were terrifying. She sat through them, tense and shocked, seeing shouts like cavernous mouths rushing through the air towards her. When at length playing was resumed, she would wonder miserably where on earth her supply of saliva had fled to. This wasn't what she had expected. It wasn't Music.

Stories of concentration camps had always sickened her. They drew round her when she lay down to sleep. They haunted her dreams. And now, here she was, in an orchestra conducted by a Nazi! She could not look at him without shuddering. She dreaded every rehearsal, when if he so much as glared at her, the look charged her with jagged edges. Even when he didn't, her knees and teeth rattled all the time in case he did. It was quite as bad at the concerts. Freddy couldn't shout, but he could fling wide his mouth, bare his teeth, and snarl just like an animal. Sometimes, in the interval, his fury would be such that he refused to go on for the second half. The Gentiles stood awkwardly in sullen groups, whilst the Jews gathered round Freddy like soothing poultices, caressing him with smooth voices. They eased him on to rostrums, and they dragged him out of trains when he was dramatically leaving the orchestra for ever.

Iris gazed forlornly out of the window, trying to smother the persistent, pushing little truth in her mind, which chanted: 'Admit it. You don't enjoy orchestras. You hate every minute of it. . . .' She would have to stifle it somehow, else how could she go on? She couldn't live without music, and yet she often caught herself wondering how she could face another day of this. If she could

only stick it until she possessed that priceless pearl, Experience, then perhaps some other orchestra might engage her. But would she ever get it, with every sheet of music a taunting challenge to her?

The others were arguing.

'Well, they called out All Change . . .'

'Yes, but that porter distinctly said . . .'

'I know, but hadn't we better make sure . . .'

Suddenly, everyone made a dive. Cases, bags, and instruments were flying about the carriage. The corridor was thick with musicians and 'cellos. Iris hung back until it was safe for her flute, and then emerged cautiously. In the nearest carriage with a proper exit door, sat Freddy. The Jews had dashed off, leaving him in the midst of piles of music, batons, parts, and the exercise book in which he was always scribbling. They said it contained his notes about conducting, but Iris knew better. On each page was the name of an instrumentalist, and under it, an ever lengthening list of his or her Crimes against Music. It would go down in History as Pringle's Purge. . .

Freddy was nearly in tears. He was trying helplessly to collect all his treasures from both sides of the carriage, the rack, and the floor. He looked basely deserted by his bodyguard. As Iris hovered in the door, too paralysed with fear to move out or in, he glanced up from his knees, with a haggard face.

'Gratitude!' he whimpered, 'bolting like that! Never a thought for *me* – and see here!' he brandished a set of parts under Iris's nose, 'my music, lent to the orchestra free of charge, and look at it! Torn! Dirty! Nobody cares about my music. Oh, no! It's only Freddy's. . . . All I've done for this orchestra . . . in my heart . . . it's here! It's all *here*!' He pounded his waistcoat passionately.

Iris gazed down at him thoughtfully, and the prickling on her scalp began to lessen. Perhaps it was the other way round, after all. Perhaps they were being beastly to *him*. She listened carefully.

' . . . And these military band chaps . . . tell 'em something, and all the thanks you get is: "Now see 'ere, Mr flaming Pringle, I

been playing this 'ere sym-phonie afore you was *born!*" No soul. They haven't got it *here!*' He battered himself so fiercely that a puff of dust shot out of his jacket. 'Just the sight of them, when I raise my baton . . . But *you* -' his rubbery mouth twisted into an ingratiating leer - 'now, you're different. Fresh from the School . . . keen . . . loving music . . . I could do with more like you. *You* care about my orchestral parts, don't you?'

Iris gaped. The shock was like a douche of cold water over her mind. She was being told she was good. She was wanted!

'I'll mend your music for you,' she heard herself say with astounding conviction.

Freddy started shuffling through the parts more hectically than ever. Muttering to himself, shrugging his shoulders bitterly, he swung round every few seconds and dumped a pile into Iris's arms.

She walked down the platform with music loaded precariously up to her chin. It seemed twice its real weight because of her own lightness of heart. Everything was all right now. She would repair his music, and get herself erased from his Liquidation List. How wonderful it was to feel safe again! Why, it made such a spaciousness in her that there was room to feel the merest bit sorry for Freddy. How dumb and stupid she had been! Not a murmur of sympathy. Not even a commiserating noise in the throat. She should have said kindly:

'I'm highly strung too, Mr Pringle. It's awful.'

And he would have been comforted to know there was a fellow-neurotic in the orchestra. She determined to have every copy patched to perfection by the evening concert, just to prove how much she cared about music.

It was a bigger undertaking than she had thought. Although she didn't stop for meals, there was still a lot to do an hour before the concert. She worked feverishly, faster and faster, until she was scarcely conscious of what she was doing.

She staggered out to the hall that evening, exhausted, but very happy. Everyone was filing on to the platform. The first straggles of tuning up were audible as she tore in at the stage door. She

was dimly aware of a white-faced librarian gesticulating to the baggage man, who droned at regular intervals:

'Dunno, I'm shore. Don' arsk *me*, cock,' and he blew specks of ash from a yellowed cigarette stub, with laboured innocence.

The music hamper was between them. Iris tenderly laid the revived copies on top of the rest of the stuff, and both men pounced. They rustled through the sheets with shaking hands.

'Oh, do be careful!' Iris protested anxiously.

The librarian didn't hear. He was holding out the Elgar Serenade for Strings, and mopping his forehead.

'Couldn't find it anywhere,' he explained, 'didn't fancy telling old Freddy. Where did *you* find it?' he added suspiciously.

'I was just mending it,' Iris said, and moved off with an air of importance.

Freddy shambled on to the platform like an anaemic thundercloud. He quelled the audience's encouragement with one grucsome look. The overture went splendidly. Iris was so happy that the notes came out of her flute all bright and bouncy. They weren't scared and squeezed any more, as if a pair of malevolent tweezers were pinching each one as it emerged. They would never be like that again. She could really live the music now. She could wallow in it; let it tumble and toss her like a cork on a mighty sea . . .

Freddy's shirt cuffs kept dropping lower and lower out of his sleeves as the overture progressed. In between wild sweeps with his arms, and jogging movements of his body, he tried to stuff them up again. He scowled at them. He snarled at them. But they took absolutely no notice. With a tremendous flourish he flung down both arms on the last beat, and his cuffs promptly swallowed his hands whole. He was so furious, he ignored the applause altogether, and remained with his back to the audience, pushing the culprits up as far as possible, teaching them a severe lesson as he did so. If they dared to come down again after the beating up he'd given them — well, he'd be jolly surprised, that's all.

He spread his hands and a watery leer for the Serenade. The wind sections folded their arms, and a curious woodenness

settled on their faces, as it always does, when it's a string piece.

Iris hoped Freddy would notice the patched parts they were playing from, but he gave no sign. It was his music stand that was plotting against him this time. Just as he was kneading his chest with emotion for the slow movement, it telescoped, and finished up two inches from the ground. Thrashing out wildly with his baton hand, he levered up the offender, gave it a look that would have shrivelled any sensitive stand, and glared accusingly at the back desk of second fiddles, who immediately panicked and dried up. Hardly had he rinsed his contorted features with a wash of piety befitting an Elgar Slow, when the stand gave at the knees again. Freddy was murderous. He jerked it up by the neck, and fastened its collar stud fit to choke it. What he muttered to it couldn't be heard, but it must have been awful, because the stand, quite overcome with embarrassment, swung its head slowly round to face the opposite way. Freddy wound up the movement in a literal sense, so that his right arm had to unwind itself anti-clockwise, with such impetus that it nearly threw him backwards off the rostrum into the audience. Regaining his balance, he seized the traitor with both hands, and shook the very life out of it with such savagery that it stood up for the rest of the concert out of sheer rigor mortis.

Every phrase in the finale slid off the strings and stroked Iris's mind with silky fingers. She was so absorbed, experiencing the music, and watching for a sign of recognition from Freddy, that at first she was only dimly aware of something being wrong. A sort of thinness. A hole. A sensation of loneliness from the first fiddles. The music had stopped making sense. Some of its meaning was missing.

She glanced at the violas. Not one of them was playing. To a man, they were tearing at their copies like maniacs.

Good God! She had stuck the last two pages together!

She snapped her eyes shut just before the snarl. But she had seen the black, utter loathing in his eyes, the sadistic curl of his fleshy lips. She had caught a glimpse of all the Jewish eyes shedding on her their velvety scorn. . . .

Her thoughts crumbled under the impact. Fragments lumbered about clumsily in her mind. In a terrible, vivid flash, she saw the succession of tortures which would be allotted to her. . . .

She sat there, her body damp with horror and despair. Her heaven-sent opportunity had flashed through her life like a shooting star. She would never be a musician now.

Making It Up

Iris was scurrying round the other room making it presentable for Rupert's return from the orchestra's tour up north. It was like a new and enchanting game, this domesticated thing. She'd never even noticed it in herself before Rupert had come into the bed-sitting-room opposite hers. But it wasn't her room now, any more than Rupert's was his room. They were referred to as 'this room' and 'the other room', according to which they happened to be in. It was so romantic, such fun. She felt like a little girl playing Mothers and Fathers.

Rupert's head slid round the door. He'd crept upstairs so as to make her jump. They clung together, and Iris sniffed at Rupert's beard. Fresh air gave it a sooty tang, that was the mystery of it.

'Oh, the soup!'

Iris sprang to the boiling-over liquid on the gas-ring, and kneeling on the floor, poured it into two bowls.

'It's an old recipe I dug up,' she said proudly, looking at Rupert for approval. He was holding his lower lip and moving it from side to side. 'I'm making a scrap-book, of unusual recipes. I'll show it to you.'

'Not now. Your letters were lovely, darling, but I didn't understand the last one. You didn't sound sure.'

Iris stood up and put the bowls on the table. The truth of it was, she hadn't understood Rupert's letter either, the one in which he said it might not be right for him to get a divorce, it might spoil their love.

'We have to consider Amy,' she said, treading cautiously on the words as if they were stepping-stones.

'But darling, we are considering Amy. She was never happy with me. Our marriage was over years ago, long before I met you. I keep telling you that.'

'But she doesn't want to let you go. She's terribly upset.'

Rupert jerked his limbs impatiently.

'Oh, that's only jealousy, because you're younger than she is. It's simply a matter of talking her round. It'll be all right soon. But don't let's discuss that. I have a surprise for you.'

'How extraordinary! I have a surprise for you, too!' Iris laughed delightedly, 'who'll have first go? Shall we toss for it?'

But Rupert had already drawn from his pocket a gold ring. He took her left hand and slid it on to her second finger. He gazed upwards in that saintly way which dismayed Iris, it made her feel she could never be good enough for him. And as if she'd said as much, Rupert declared in the husky voice he saved for solemn moments:

'I hope you will prove yourself more worthy of this than Amy.'

'Oh I do hope so! I'll try, I'll try!'

To cover her agitation, Iris held him away from her and presented him with her surprise:

'Guess what! I've given up my job!'

Rupert stared at her for a minute. Then he began stuttering, and shaking his head so that his cheeks wobbled.

'You've what? What do you mean? Whatever possessed you to do that?'

Bewildered by his reaction, Iris started stammering too.

'I thought you'd be pleased. It was to surprise you.'

'I am surprised,' Rupert informed her.

Iris twisted the ring on her finger.

'I'm sorry, then. I thought you'd be pleased. I want to try and get back into music, then we'd be even closer. You have said I ought to take up the flute again, haven't you?' Her eyes begged him to agree, but he glanced sideways at her then fixed his gaze elsewhere. 'Yes, well I know I've lost confidence, but that's because I'm doing the sort of job any fool could do. Until I chuck it, I won't be able to get back to playing.'

'And how are we supposed to live until then? You don't imagine I can keep you, do you?'

The ring seemed to be stinging Iris's flesh. She turned away, and all over the room – the specially tidy room – those foolish imaginings she had released into it were laughing back at her like

invisible imps. She had so wanted to play at being a real wife, with real housekeeping money, living each hour with love, creating a home and fostering it every day, all day, watching over it tenderly, adding to it, subtracting from it, making decisions about it.

'I'd like to be like Mrs Tittlemouse,' she murmured, moving distractedly from one piece of furniture to another.

'Like *who*?'

Iris blushed, and hastened to redeem her blunder. She was usually very tactful, concealing the difference in their backgrounds.

'Oh, someone I once knew, a very long time ago now, must have been last Friday – no, that's the wrong opus. That's Pooh. Take no notice, darling. I'm rambling!'

She laughed at his puzzlement, and infected, his features relaxed. He came up and pulled her gently against him.

'We're wasting time, darling. Let's go to bed. We'll talk about it in the morning.'

She saw in his eyes high hopes of her performance, and again dismay gripped her. He had said, right at the beginning, how much better in bed than Amy she was. Since then she had grown increasingly afraid she wouldn't be able to keep it up. Every time they lay in the dark together, she was afraid. There was no how or why about the great ecstasy. It came from nowhere. It could as easily withhold its blessing, and then what? Lately, she'd watched her fear taking shape in the darkness, strange geometrical patterns forming before her eyes, colours arranging and rearranging themselves as she worried her way through the ritual.

Tomorrow was Saturday. Iris went to her parents for the weekend, and Rupert went to see his children and work on his wife to give him a divorce. At least, that was what Iris had tacitly accepted, though in any case, her mind had preferred to look intently in the opposite direction. But now, uneasy and insecure because underneath Rupert's morning caresses there still lurked annoyance, she sat up in bed and addressed the wall opposite.

'Must you go today, darling? We've been separated for two whole weeks. I could ring up my mother and make some excuse. Must you go?'

Rupert sighed ponderously, dealing her a sharp glance then returning to complete the sigh.

'I'm afraid so. There are things to be seen to. It's a nuisance, I know. I'd much rather be with you.'

Iris's fingers plucked nervously at blanket fluffs.

'Couldn't you go just for the day, then?'

Rupert swung his legs out of bed and reached for his dressing-gown.

'Sorry, darling. I'm afraid not. After all, it's not as if I enjoy it. There's bound to be a scene.'

He was now in Iris's line of vision, so she transferred it to another wall.

'Where do you sleep?'

A small pause.

'Where do you think I sleep? Where else can I sleep? There's no spare bed.'

Iris sensed she was driving herself to her own destruction but couldn't apply the brake.

'But you don't . . .'

Rupert tied the cord of his dressing-gown viciously, and made towards the door.

'It's a kindness, with Amy. A duty. That's all. I can't think why you're probing like this, darling. You know it's you I love. Isn't that enough?'

Iris jumped out of bed and put her arms round him. She was crying, and was conscious of being ugly with it.

'Darling, please don't go. Not this time. I can't bear it. It reminds me of . . . things. Darling, I'm asking you not to go.'

Rupert sat her on the bed, then wriggled himself tidier.

'I don't want to hear any more about it, darling, and I refuse to discuss it further. You'd better get dressed, or we'll both miss our trains.'

But the tears once turned on were impossible to turn off. It was just as if the washer had gone, Iris thought as she groped through the watery blindness for her clothes, trying this and other little jokes to cheer herself up. She tried scolding herself

next, pointing out how unreasonable and demanding she was being. What a poor thing her love was, by comparison with Rupert's, which rose above the petty and sordid. He had not even wanted to hear her confessions of past misdemeanours, and that was a relief – she would have felt so wretched a creature in the narration. Yet it was those very affairs which were now pushing their way insistently to the front, as she stumbled about getting breakfast. Rupert sat at the table reading the paper, glancing at her irritably now and then. It was those shabby little affairs which were trying to range themselves alongside this, the great love of her life, her union with a man of ideals and inner purity. The cheek of them! she thought indignantly as she pushed them back where they belonged, the muddy pool at the bottom of her unconscious.

Until Rupert put on his coat and snapped his attaché case shut, she did not really believe he would go, leaving her to grapple alone with the darkness upon her. But he kissed her fondly, told her to stop being silly, and hurried out. She did stop then, long enough to hear incredulously the slam of the front door, then to run to the window and see him walking away down the road.

It was quite amazing where all this water came from, pouring out of her eyes hour after hour. At times she wondered if she'd forgotten how to stop, and would have to go into hospital like those hiccup cases you read about. But suddenly it was over, and she was deciding what to say on the phone to her mother so as not to arouse suspicion. She dared not go there for the week-end now, or they'd surely smell a rat. For some reason she wished her mind had not selected that phrase, and for a while she juggled with a few substitutes, finally choosing 'wonder what was up'. She managed the phone call surprisingly well, and even laughed a little. A bad cold had been the ideal excuse, as she still sounded snuffy and throaty.

Washing up the breakfast things, an occupation during which unguarded thoughts are liable to slip through, she debated on how she would break the news to her family, when Rupert had secured his divorce. It was something quite unimaginable. It made

her feel ill. If only she hadn't a Past, that was the trouble. They'd nod knowingly to one another and say: 'We've heard it all before, haven't we? How ever many times has she insisted "but this time it's different!" *Ὡς κτλ.*' But they'd be wrong, at last. She'd show them that a man could love her enough to get a divorce and marry her, and what greater test of devotion was there than that? None of the others had used the word love, that was how she'd known Rupert was different. *They* thought men were only attracted to her for one reason, and it may well have looked like that, but it wasn't like that. As a matter of fact bed had been one big bore (until Rupert, of course). It was the privilege of loving that counted

The argument was thus going splendidly until, as so often happened, a quite irrelevant memory shot to the surface. Almost audibly she heard the voice of a young man, little more than her own age at the time, which was nineteen:

'You're not the kind of girl men marry, but you'd be unforgettable after a week-end or two.'

She became engulfed in confusion and doubt again. She would have to go back and start all over again. But why on earth did she go to all this effort? The plain fact was, she was in it too deep. She was powerless to go back, and afraid to go on.

'So what?' she thought lightly, 'so what? So there are things to be done, amends to be made. Rupert can't abide a woman who makes scenes, therefore I must do something to make it up to him when he comes home. I must get another job, that will please him most.'

But she had been so happy in her dream of keeping house, pottering about between cups of tea, fussing up cushions – except, she realized, there was only one cushion to fuss up. Well, she must find a compromise. A homework job, that was the answer! She would ask the old girl in the basement flat, who sat all day and half the night at a table, counting saccharine tablets. Her aged friends did homework jobs too, of various kinds, furtively eking out their pensions, living in dread of the Assistance finding out.

Down to this underground world Iris descended, and there, as always, Mrs Hewitt sat all over a kitchen chair in the dim light and the stale air of the furnished room. Beside her on the floor was a crate of saccharine tablets, and on the table was a cardboard box nearly full of them.

'I'm married now,' Iris explained, showing her ring as undeniable proof, 'look, it has a bevelled edge. That's what it's called, Rupert says.'

'Very nice,' Mrs Hewitt said dryly, 'won't you sit down? You don't mind if I go on working, do you?'

'I need a homework job too, that's what I wanted to ask you about.'

The pale rinsed-out eyes looked across at Iris. There was no life in her voice either, or in the room, now that Iris came to notice. There was just a cessation.

'Why not do the same as I do? *He* complains if I don't keep up the numbers, but it's my eyes, you see. It's tiring on the eyes. It'd be a real help to me if you'd take some of these, then I'll pay you. It's very little money, of course.'

'What does it work out per hour?'

'Well, not much at first, but you get quicker. I reckon on three shillings an hour now. You watch how I do it . . . your packets this side of you, tablets in front, then you scoop them into a packet with a ruler, but it must be exactly a hundred. Sometimes he opens a packet and checks it, you see. Once he found a hundred and one, and I've never heard the last of it. I don't think it was true, but what can you say?'

The level of her voice never varied, and the scraping of ruler on table never stopped. Iris felt the room growing more oppressive every minute.

'I'd like to have a shot at it, please.'

Mrs Hewitt placed both hands flat on the table and pulled herself upright. She rummaged behind a frayed curtain and produced a large cardboard box, which she filled with tablets from the crate.

'If I haven't given you enough packets, come down and get more. And mind you don't pop any in your cup of tea. *He* knows

to the last how many are in this crate, though you wouldn't credit it. Leastways, that's what he says, and I've not dared to put him to the test.'

'Goodness, it's a weight! I can't imagine ever getting through this lot!' Iris laughed uncertainly, and backed to the door. 'Well, good-bye, and thank you very much.'

She waited for a reply, but Mrs Hewitt had already dismissed her and was once more established at the table, scooping mechanically, rhythmically, yet without the vital pulse of any other sort of rhythm.

Iris returned thoughtfully to her own floor, considering whether Mrs Hewitt was more like a robot or a corpse. Full of purpose, she found a ruler and set out the table as she had learnt. After an hour's work, there seemed no difference in the level of tablets in the box. Another hour passed, and still no headway was apparent. She did some little sums on an old envelope and found she'd earned two-and-ten. It was disheartening, but she must persevere. Think how pleased Rupert was going to be when his face came round the door on Monday and she said gaily:

'Darling, guess what! I've got another job!'

She would be quite forgiven for her inexcusable behaviour of this morning.

It was silent in the room save for the scraping of the ruler. She began to feel like one of those erring mortals punished by the gods with some eternal, repetitive punishment. And she wondered, playfully, just how long one could do this work without going off one's head.

Something Happening

Iris rolled out of bed and went to the window. As usual, when she flung back the curtains she experienced a sense of unreality. Every morning for the past five years it had been like waking into a bad dream. The council estate stretched as far as the eye could see, and in a minute when Iris went into the bathroom she would be able to see it stretching the same distance the other side; long lines of grey concrete with oblongs of half-hearted gardens divided by wire fencing. No trees, not even bushes. Some time in the future there might be hedges round the tiny squares of soil passing for front gardens, but the cuttings stolen after dark from the doctor's privet were not in any hurry.

Rupert came back from washing, letting in wailing sounds from the children's room as he did so.

'It's half past seven.'

Iris said without turning round: 'I thought it was an afternoon rehearsal.'

'I've a lot to do to the Sibelius before then,' Rupert retorted. He clenched and unclenched his hands, then clicked each finger-joint carefully. 'Listen to that ruddy dog next door.'

'The Taylors have just let it out,' Iris said, leaning out of the window. 'Poor wretch, it's tied up most of the day, and indoors it's shut in a cupboard. Did you know that, darling?'

'I didn't, but it doesn't surprise me.'

'Mrs Taylor says she's going to take it out and lose it, she's fed up with the barking. Think how terrified it would be, never having known anything but this back garden. Are you listening?'

She glanced at Rupert and saw by his jerking head that he was mentally half-way through the quick movement. She supposed she'd better get dressed, now she'd managed to trace what was different about today. Nina was starting school. They called them Primary schools now, not the same thing as the Council schools Iris's parents used to talk about.

A train rattled along the track just beyond the next row of houses. Smoke curled upwards then swooped to embrace the washing-lines. Perhaps, Iris thought, zipping up her skirt, there were people in the carriages looking out in distaste and wondering – as once upon a time she had sat wondering – what it could be like living in such a place.

The howling of the dog next door intensified. Iris shook out her hair and began brushing it. There were tiny scratching sounds behind her. Rupert was removing with a razor blade the fool bowings these modern editors put in fiddle music.

The last wisps of smoke were reluctantly wandering away. Nanny had sometimes broken bounds – it was a big secret – and taken Iris and Philip to watch trains from a bridge which made the smoke absolutely furious. The forbidden walk had involved passing grey clusters of flat-chested houses, unlike anything you'd make with Lott's bricks. So why did grown-ups make such sad houses?

There was a sudden commotion in the next garden. An angry voice, a dull thud, and then the dog yelping and yelping, the yelps drawing closer together to become like human screams. Iris put down the brush and peered out of the window. The dog was staggering about in circles, dragging a paw impaled on the prong of a rake. Mrs Taylor, dancing up and down in curlers and stained dressing-gown was making grabs at the rake. Now she had pulled it out, thrown it aside, and was bundling the dog indoors.

For a while, Iris stayed motionless, sickening sensations shooting up through her body and hitting the roof of her head, as if her hands were gripping not the window-sill but a live rail.

'They won't dare take it to a vet,' Rupert observed behind her shoulder. The scratching was resumed.

'We'll have to report it,' Iris said shakily out of a dry mouth.

'Don't be absurd. People like the Taylors aren't worth bothering about.'

'But dogs are. I shall report it to the Society today.'

'Well, don't blame me if you get your face slashed for your trouble.'

Iris paused at the door. 'I'll type a letter anonymously.'

Rupert looked over the music stand, the corners of his mouth flickering. 'Like you did to the cruelty to children people? What good did that do? Why can't you stop interfering? You're always making trouble.'

Iris went out quickly, bumping into Mark's cot which, by means of rocking his body on all fours, he had travelled out of his bedroom and into the cramped passage. Iris manœuvred it back with some difficulty and more annoyance. She wished Rupert had not reminded her of the other letters. After all, that had been years ago, before she'd learnt what bringing up children was like, with their perpetual quarrelling, their nagging for sweets and ice lollies. Her dream of benign motherhood had long since faded. Any day now she would be indistinguishable from the shouting women who had once roused her to indignant action. In its sly insinuating way, the greyiness was creeping into her. It would get her in the end, as it had got everybody else.

'I'm already dressed,' Nina announced proudly. She was sitting on the floor in a bizarre collection of clothes put on all wrong. On her knees, being similarly dressed up, was the disreputable toy dachshund she insisted on calling Jesus.

'Those reds don't go,' Iris said, forcing Mark into garments which he battled with delightedly.

'I like them. Why was Mrs Taylor's dog crying?'

'He's better now. It was nothing. Come on, let's go down.'

With maddening deliberation and refusing offers of help, Mark collected together his assortment of treasures. On the way to the door he dropped them, and again at the top of the stairs. By the time they reached the living-room, Nina was established on the piano stool, wearing the Junior toilet seat like a halo. She could not practise without it.

'Fetish-ridden kids,' Iris thought, banging into the kitchen. As accessories, they rendered her even more of a freak in the eyes of her neighbours, instead of the less she had hoped.

Through the window over the sink you could see the tumbled garden, with pieces of pram, old cot, armchair – material for wonderful adventures. At the bottom was the sandpit which had

so mystified everyone when Rupert was digging it. He liked digging deep holes, so now there was a compost heap, tended daily, but there his gardening enthusiasm began and ended.

‘Call Daddy, will you, Nina?’

‘Oh lord, not that cereal again!’

Mark started bringing toys to the table, one by one, arranging them in a particular pattern round his plate. There was a yoo-hoo from outside; Ma Hodges was on the scrounge again, her giant bosom propped on the fence, loose elephant-mouth preparing to spread into a toothless grin.

‘Can I borrow a drop of tea, dear? I’m right out.’

Iris responded gladly; she still felt so guilty about Ma Hodges, who presided over all the birth agonies on the estate.

‘I didn’t hear you holler,’ she’d said reproachfully when at last admitted to collect the remains of the birth for the ritual burning.

‘I’m most terribly sorry,’ Iris had apologized, ‘I thought I was making an awful fuss.’

‘Standing at the bottom of the stairs, I was, and didn’t hear a murmur. Most of them swear at their hubbies something shocking.’

Iris felt she had let Ma Hodges down.

‘Mrs Bamford has missed,’ Ma Hodges was saying happily, ‘better watch yourself. It’s catching, you know. That’s four over the way, and now it’s coming up our side.’

‘I’m glad you warned me,’ Iris said, and hurried in to separate her squabbling children.

‘It was my turn for the teddy plate,’ Mark sobbed, ‘now I’m not gonna eat.’

‘Oh shut up, *shut up!*’

Rupert frowned, almost imperceptibly. One felt, rather than observed, his frowns.

‘Cut my toast,’ Nina ordered.

‘What do you say?’

‘Please!’ she snapped.

Iris sat down facing the window – the only one in the street without net curtains.

‘There goes Peckham off to the works.’

Most of the men worked at the factory and were a lot better off than musicians in the City orchestra.

Rupert looked up from his newspaper.

‘Peckham is thinking of changing to piece work.’

‘How admirable! I didn’t know anyone here was interested!’

Iris was quite excited, until Rupert went on: ‘Not *that* sort of peace work, idiot. He was telling me at the bus stop how his shifts means he can only get a haircut on a Monday.’

‘So?’

‘Well, don’t you see? He has to put up with a tickly vest until bath night on Saturday.’

‘Poor old Peckham. Stop kicking the table, Mark.’

‘I want to.’

‘You’ll get a smack, then.’

Mark burst into elaborate crying and leaned against Iris. She placed a stiff arm round him, searching the view for distraction. Percy the Pale Pole was setting out. He was Ma Hodges’ latest lodger, and to Iris’s mind not nearly so decorative as Georges, the bowing-from-the-waist Belgian, who’d disappeared the day Ma Hodges had her head swathed in bandages. Iris didn’t know if they had real names; Ma Hodges only referred to them – with a sideways jerk of her head – as ‘he’ or ‘him’.

Already the dull-eyed houses were disgorging children bound for school. Soon the pavements would be thick with them. A plague of children, Iris sometimes thought after tea, when the shrill noise in the street was at its most deafening. And underneath it would be travelling the thin sound of a Bach Unaccompanied, with pauses when Rupert corrected the editing.

Today she must join the procession to the school beyond the railway line, under the bridge where older boys teased the bats after nightfall.

‘Hurry up, Nina. It’s time to go. We mustn’t be late on your first day.’

Nina approached, her eyes bright with expectancy. She plunged her arms into the coat sleeves Iris was holding ready. Iris had

given school a big build-up, like the Child Psychologists said, but she had an uneasy feeling while putting it over, that the Child Psychologists had not been educated at State schools.

An old pipe juttin' out of his mouth, Mark sat alertly in the pram which had a list to one side. He sat stroking a dirty piece of shawl that he carried everywhere, his mind absorbed in Nina's excitement.

'Wave good-bye to Daddy,' Iris said, swinging the pram round.

Albert, the coloured boy from Number 18, appeared from nowhere and stood beaming down at Nina.

'Starting school, eh? You'll like that, Neen. Can I walk along with you?' he asked Iris, who nodded briefly. She was not at all sure about this attachment. Albert was nearly ten, and certainly not retarded, yet he'd spend hours squatting on the edge of the sandpit listening to Nina's chattering as one under a spell. He seldom spoke himself.

Turning the corner to pass under the bridge, Iris noticed through a window that an emergency meeting of 'the abortion club' was in session. What lovely evocative names the remedies had . . . Tansy . . . Penny Royal . . . Slippery Elm. . . Members sometimes knocked on Iris's door, asking if they could try lifting her piano. It was really quite gratifying.

She considered Albert again. Scraping along in shoes which seemed heavier than his body, he hung on Nina's words, his black eyes gleaming into her transparent blue ones. Perhaps a letter to the *Nursery World* . . .

'I've got a little sister,' Albert announced, ducking his head shyly, 'but she don't talk like Neen.'

'Oh no?' Iris said, wondering how best to explain this away, then deciding upon: 'Nina's got a musical ear, you see.'

'Which one?' Albert asked, searching for differences.

'Well, here we are,' Iris said lamely, braking the pram behind dozens of other prams and push-chairs.

Albert lumbered off, stopped, and called out: 'I like how Neen talks, see.' Then he took to his heels, his fuzzy head lolling about with embarrassment.

Iris took Nina's hand – given so trustingly she felt like Abraham taking Isaac to be sacrificed. They entered the stone courtyard, where hundreds of children were racing about like things demented. They edged round the wall until they came to the door of the grey building. Tall teachers with large behinds and strident voices were herding newcomers into the hall. It was packed full of ugly women shaking the arms of their children ugly with crying; women cackling, women grunting, children squawking. Iris became fascinated by a pig-faced woman. 'The pigs are walking on their hind legs now.' She had walked into a chapter from *Animal Farm*.

The children were being lined up, dragged struggling from their mothers. Nina was lifted bodily out of Iris's arms and borne away down a corridor. The look on her face . . .

Propelled into the courtyard by the moving crowd, Iris went to a corner and leaned her head against the wall, hating herself, the school, the teachers, the estate, the poky identical houses, the ugliness of the women and their telly-obsessed lives, their wretched kids who'd presented Nina with lice and Mark with worms.

'Makes you feel a criminal, don't it?' a crackly voice behind her said. Then an arm was thrust through hers and she was eased away from the wall. She saw it was the pig-woman. And she saw, at intervals all round the courtyard, other women standing with heads bowed to the wall. 'But it's not a bit of use carrying on,' the pig-woman was saying, 'I've seen six of them off, and good rid-dance, say I! It's only the first takes you like this. You don't believe me, do you? This your boy in the pram? Wait till it's his turn. You'll be counting the days, just you mark my words! What did you say your name was?' The tiny eyes set deep in folds of flesh surveyed the view. 'Cor, what a dump, eh? Well, Iris, I'm off. See you four o'clock.'

One by one, hankies pressed to their faces, lone sufferers were being led away from the wall by the veterans.

'She called me by my Christian name,' Iris marvelled. She'd thought nobody ever would.